

BATTLEFIELD VS COD: WHICH NEXT-GEN SHOOTER IS BEST?
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This month I had an unusual evening wherein I finished *Final Fantasy VII* and *Link's Awakening* within an hour of each other – the former I'd beaten before, the latter I conquered for the first time since picking it up in 1998. Both of these games have a kind of magic and escapism that are the hallmarks of masterful designers, and moments that will certainly live with me forever.

When you meet people who love games as much as you, face-to-face, the discussion of such subjects makes you feel like you're part of a bigger entertainment revolution. It's the best thing, finding those who will talk passionately about sunsets in Liberty City, pushing a button in Tenpenny Tower or share your excitement for ramming Ultima Weapon with the Highwind – who have that connection with games that make them feel validated. That's what all this is about, for me. That's why I'm here, doing this job. I want to make you care about this stuff as much as I do.

Now, I could tell you to get excited about next-gen consoles once again, but you already know that. You know that at least a few of the finest minds in the industry are creating something you will love, right now. You may already have a PS4 or Xbox One. But gaming is about so much more than just the here and now; look around you, scan your shelves and cupboards – find the games you loved when you were younger and love them again. Relive the classics you played this year and remember what made them so damn good. Understand how they shaped you into the person you are today. Games have that power.

Samuel Roberts
EDITOR



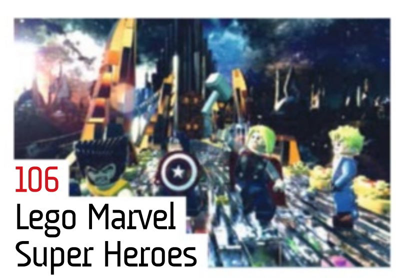

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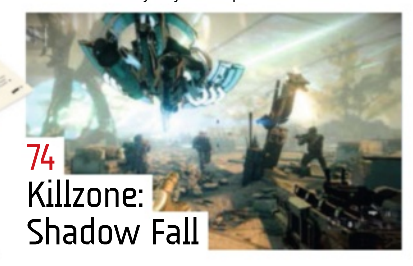
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(NEW GAME ALERT)

Uncharted on PS4 leads Sony into 2014

→ Naughty Dog has revealed its first PlayStation 4 title – but it was a bit of an anti-climax…



Above *Uncharted*'s story is still shrouded in mystery at present.

Below A port of *The Last Of Us* might not go amiss, either.

There are three PlayStation 4 titles that will motivate dedicated gamers into buying the console; 1) Whatever open world game Studio Santa Monica has been working on since *God Of War III* came out in 2010; 2) The reannounced Team ICO successor *The Last Guardian* on course for its 2065 release date; 3) Naughty Dog's next title. Those hoping Naughty Dog would go for a new IP twice in a row after *The Last Of Us* will be disappointed – it's a fourth *Uncharted* instalment with an unspecified title and timeframe.

Announced just as the PS4 was about to go on-sale, all that was shown was a map hovering over Madagascar and marked in blood, while a voiceover supplied by actor Todd Stashwick (*Heroes*, *The Originals*) discusses how he's been rotting in a hell hole by someone who never looked back.

Who that person is remains to be seen; the obvious answer is Nathan Drake, of course, and we still expect to see him as the protagonist in this instalment, though perhaps Naughty Dog's experimentation with playable characters in *The Last Of Us* will result in more than one playable character this time around.

Expect the cast to expand, perhaps with more recognisable famous voices than before. *Lost* actor Dominic Monaghan has been teasing his work with Naughty Dog in recent months, and unless the studio became a three-project developer on the sly, which is very unlikely, expect to see him crop up in this title in some capacity.

This reveal was little more than a glorified logo, really, and rather anti-climactic – if Sony really wanted to steal the show ahead of the next-gen release, a quick look at Drake created with the PS4's capabilities would've sucked attention away from the Xbox One. Nonetheless, Naughty

DATA STREAM → REGISTER A NEW 3DS THIS CHRISTMAS AND YOU WILL GET MARIO 3D LAND FOR FREE

Dog promises exceptional visuals from the fourth *Uncharted* title. "Amy, Justin, and the team are hard at work on an amazing new instalment of the *Uncharted* series to be released exclusively on the PlayStation 4 system," says Arne Meyer, community spokesperson for Naughty Dog. "Our goal is to continue what we've done in previous console generations and once again deliver the best in storytelling, performance capture, technical innovation and graphics on the PS4."

IN TERMS OF release dates, it's obvious that Sony will be targeting this for Christmas next year – March sees the release of *InFamous: Second Son*, we're expecting *The Order: 1886* around summer 2014 and then *Uncharted* on PS4 will likely headline the console's second Christmas.

A new *Uncharted* was inevitable – it's one of Sony's only proven triple-A brands outside of *Gran Turismo*, though it felt like Nathan Drake's storyline came to a close with *Uncharted 3*, which followed many of the same beats as the second game while shedding little further light on its engaging cast of characters. The absence of Drake entirely could be dramatically more interesting at this point. We're likely to see *Uncharted 4* in action for the first time at Sony's E3 2014 conference.

Sony's 2014 plans are strong in their own right, but Microsoft already has a number of big hitters lined up for next year. The next *Halo* title is likely destined for release later in 2014, while *Titanfall* will attract a lot of interest to the Xbox One when it releases in March. We're intrigued to see how Sony will maintain momentum in the face of that. While the reveal of this new *Uncharted* was hardly awe-inspiring, its very existence alone will justify the purchase of a PS4 by a large portion of its potential audience. Perhaps, right now, after a successful launch, that might be all that Sony needs.



Above No suffix or number has been attached to *Uncharted* yet, leaving its premise up in the air.

> "A new Uncharted was inevitable, though it felt like Drake's story came to a close with Uncharted 3, which followed the beats of Uncharted 2"





Below: Drake in *Uncharted 3*, the very well-made but inferior sequel to *Among Thieves*, the series' best.

 
FINAL FANTASY X/X-2 HD HAS A RELEASE DATE OF 21 MARCH, VITA TBA. HAR-HAR-HAR-HAR-HAR 

(OPINION)

How 3DS and Vita Won 2013

→ The two handheld consoles faced very different challenges this year – here's why both came out on top

In the age of the smartphone, the question posed to Nintendo and Sony was where its latest handhelds, the 3DS and Vita, fit into a landscape where almost every casual consumer in the world now automatically had a convergence device that could play videogames on the go. Over the course of 2013, we believe that both consoles have quite clearly transformed from hobbyist hardware into essential purchases.

For Nintendo, it's been about overloading the console with strong software and compensating for a weak opening 18 months; and for Sony, a complete change of philosophy in the identity of the console was needed. Both were effective approaches, and while neither are likely to ever reach the heights of their preceding DS and PSP sales, they have demonstrated their relevancy in this modern age to us, the players.

Flash back to this time last year, and the Vita had a sagging release schedule of *Persona 4: Golden*, *PlayStation All-Stars* and a forgotten *Sly Cooper* sequel, with almost no third-party support and Sony about to mobilise development to the PS4. It needed games fast, and indie games ended up being the solution to that problem. With an already positive legacy in PSN indie development thanks to its pub fund initiative, courting indie developers like Dennaton Games and Jasper Byrne to create Vita and PS3 versions of popular PC titles rightly won the Vita acclaim. This will continue in 2014 with the release of *Hotline Miami 2*, *Volume* and a whole bunch of others. In most cases, too, these versions have been definitive, and that incredible OLED screen proves a good match for the retro-style 2D games that make up a not insignificant part of the indie sphere.

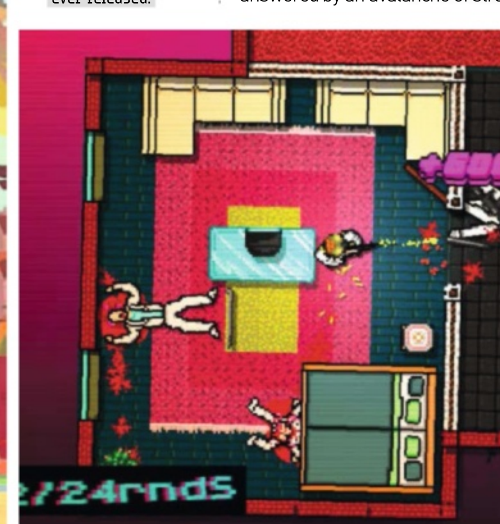
The Vita remains in the sales doldrums, but creative success should never be confused with such matters. Whether the focus on indie games will generate interest from the broader market is up for debate – a more commercial move for the console was the focus on Remote Play during the PS4's reveal. How relevant that feature will be during the next-gen console's lifespan will be pretty hard to measure, though with a number of generous Vita price cuts across Sony's different territories, it's probably the console's best shot at getting anywhere near PSP numbers.

The 3DS' own creative renaissance has been a lot more straightforward. Criticism of the 3DS's meagre catalogue were answered by an avalanche of strong software



Above The 3DS proved its worth during this year.



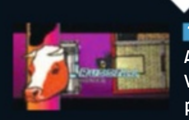


Below *Hotline Miami*, possibly *the best* handheld port ever released.

→ KINGDOM UNDER FIRE II HAS FINALLY RE-EMERGED, NOW DESTINED FOR PLAYSTATION 4 AS WELL AS PC



5 GAMES THAT DEFINED VITA IN 2013



1 Hotline Miami

A perfect match for the Vita. The art style and pixelated visuals are such a good fit for that lovely screen.



2 Spelunky

In much the same way, *Spelunky*'s visual style works wonderfully on that screen, and such a compelling gameplay loop is great for on-the-go play.



3 Persona 4: Golden

Not every great Vita release was an indie game – this smashing JRPG represents the genre well on Sony's handheld.



4 Killzone: Mercenary

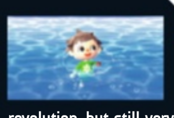
Proving the Vita could still do 'big' console games, the latest handheld *Killzone* was solid.



5 Tearaway

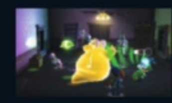
LittleBigPlanet developers Media Molecule further proved their innovation by successfully creating a worthy new IP with an art direction infused by papercraft.

5 GAMES THAT DEFINED 3DS IN 2013



1 Animal Crossing: New Leaf

The new sequel is an evolution, not a revolution, but still very addictive.



2 Luigi's Mansion 2: Dark Moon

A sequel that's far superior to the GameCube original, *Dark Moon* is an engaging haunted house adventure.



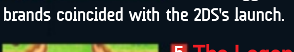
3 Monster Hunter 4

It might not have made it here in 2013, but *Monster Hunter 4* was the holy grail of releases in Japan, selling 4 million copies and counting.



4 Pokémon X & Y

The arrival of one of the world's biggest kids' brands coincided with the 2DS's launch.

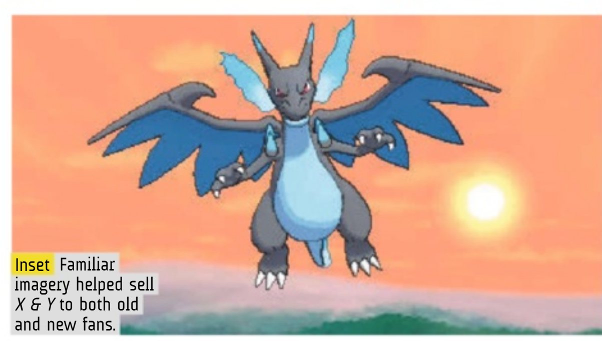




5 The Legend Of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds

Part sequel to the SNES original, part new instalment, this was a fine send-off to 2013 for Nintendo's handheld.





Inset Familiar imagery helped sell *X & Y* to both old and new fans.

> "During 2013, both consoles have transformed from hobbyist hardware to essential purchases"

throughout the year, including *Luigi's Mansion 2: Dark Moon, Castlevania, Animal Crossing: New Leaf, Mario and Luigi: Dream Team Bros, Pokémon X & Y* and *Zelda: A Link Between Worlds*. It was Nintendo sticking rigidly to its guns – the scheduling just happened to be a lot more comparatively competitive than it has been on Nintendo hardware in the last few years. In Japan, too, the release of *Monster Hunter 4* cements the console's dominance, a boon that Sony really should have moved heaven and Earth to keep in the PlayStation family.

Nintendo has successfully deflected any questions about the relevance of the 3DS by showing why a handheld with £30 games can be valuable: long form experiences, zero microtransactions and depth in gameplay design. That this still has the ability to draw in casual players is encouraging – *Pokémon X & Y* and *Animal Crossing* are the sort of games that have the capacity to keep selling for years.

Culturally, these consoles contribute so much to the texture of the medium, and scratch an itch that iOS and Android do not. That's no slight to either of those enormous markets, but we wouldn't want to play *Pokémon X & Y* or *Zelda* on a touchscreen during a ten-hour flight or four-hour train journey; there is a value to the Vita and 3DS as dedicated gaming devices that is still as exciting to us today as the Game Boy was in the early Nineties. Both can now be unequivocally recommended as purchases based on their performances this year.

Now, the challenge facing both is to continue that momentum in 2014. The 3DS release schedule seems to run dry after Christmas, and with Nintendo undoubtedly committing its resources to ensuring that the Wii U has a similar comeback in 2014, *Smash Bros For 3DS* and a creepy Pikachu pet thing appears to be it for the handheld. Who knows, maybe a *Majora's Mask* announcement is just around the corner, but it will take momentum through software for the 3DS to continue burning brightly.

The Vita faces the same challenge, yet at least right now we can say that both consoles have reached essential status. They've faced down their critics, and now, no extended period of travel should go without at least one of them in your luggage.



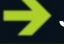
Above The 2DS, aimed at younger audiences, has been well-timed to hit this Christmas.



Above *Zelda* helped the 3DS to its best year so far.



Above *Animal Crossing* remains easy to love.





(OPINION)

Metal Gear Solid V: A Game Of Two Halves

→ Metal Gear Solid V will ship in two parts – Ground Zeroes and The Phantom Pain. But will this fractured approach to distribution affect how the series' fifth instalment is received?

It was recently announced by Konami that *Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes* will release as a standalone game in Spring 2014, as a cross-gen title. The game is slated as a prelude to *The Phantom Pain*, introducing players to the open-world aspects of *Metal Gear Solid* before throwing them into the most expansive world the series has seen. *Ground Zeroes* will be a more contained open-world; based in a Cuban internment camp, 'Punished' Snake will have to utilise day and night cycles and work with or against weather conditions to achieve his goals within the facility.

Ground Zeroes will act as a stopgap between *Peace Walker* and *The Phantom Pain*, filling in the narrative gaps left by Kojima's mad play-it-by-ear method of storytelling. "The advanced capabilities of the FOX Engine have allowed me to tell the story in a new way," says Kojima. "There will be a significant difference in what *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* brings to the series, so we want to ease the players into the new open world environment and its potential."

This method of teasing a game via what is effectively pre-release DLC has worked for other games in the past – *Dead Rising 2: Case Zero* gave players a taste of the new item-combining mechanics, and *Mass Effect 2*'s last DLC – *Arrival* – was effectively a prequel for the third instalment of the series, heralding the coming of the Reapers.

It's a brave move, though. *Ground Zeroes* will retail for £29.99 physically, £19.99 digitally on current gen, or digitally on next-gen for £29.99. If the game is anything less than five to six hours long, players are going to feel short-changed – unless *Ground Zeroes* offers a self-contained narrative with a cohesive, worthwhile environment to get to grips with, the prelude-cum-DLC package risks putting players off *The Phantom Pain* completely. It's the adverse demo effect; where a player gets enough hands-on time with a game to think 'That's enough *Metal Gear* for me.'

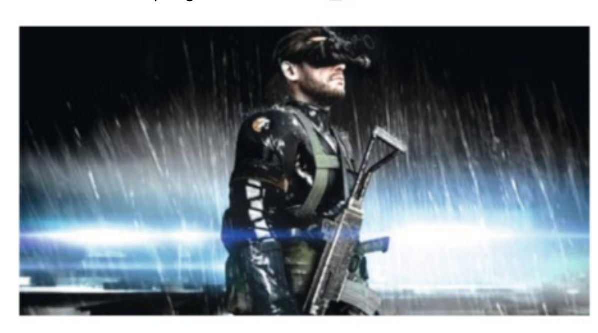
Kojima and Konami are travelling a risky path here. On the one hand, it's a chance to get that next-gen *Metal Gear* experience early, but on the other, the asking price might just be a little too high. Is this a tactic by Konami to extract more money from players – splitting a game in half and charging for it twice? Or is it a legitimately forward-thinking innovation that will experiment with how players respond to tutorials and prologues? We'll find out in Spring.

Below David Hayter has retired the Snake role now, and has been replaced by Kiefer Sutherland.





Below The Cold War vibes of *Peace Walker* and *Ground Zeroes* comes with a different, more grounded atmosphere than the more sci-fi *MGS* instalments.



→ A MARIO GALAXY STAGE HAS BEEN ADDED TO SUPER SMASH BROS ON WII U AND 3DS – IT LOOKS AMAZING



(REPORT)

The Indie City

→ We took a trip to Nottingham to visit the country's foremost free games festival, and chatted with GameCity director Iain Simons about his motivations behind running the event

A games festival is not like a music festival," Iain Simons tells when we sit down with him in GameCity's HQ. "The way in which we consume music is relatively simple; it's one-to-many. I need a stage, a PA and we can all broadly have the same experience when the songs are pumped out. It's not like that with games – the best way of communicating games en masse is to have an expo, and then you end up with something like E3. I'm not interested in that, we're trying to do the opposite... we don't really know what that is, but we're trying to do it!"

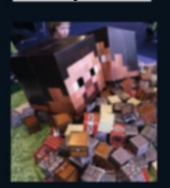
The most notable difference between GameCity and other consumer events is the atmosphere – at Gamescom or Eurogamer, there are booths set up with headsets and tight schedules; you play a game for 10 minutes, then you're ushered away, the booth organisers desperate to keep on top of the queue. GameCity operates differently; as its name suggests, the event runs throughout Nottingham over the course of a week – it's not confined to one show hall, but rather a plethora of buildings and streets. It feels a bit like a game hubworld in and of itself, taking advantage of Nottingham's unique geography to set out an event with a distinct personality and purpose.

"Part of the virtue of this event is that you can go out into the city and explore it at your own pace, stumbling onto things completely by surprise," Simons tells us. There are lectures, playthroughs, an open arcade and two big screens just off Nottingham's central town hall – the intent of GameCity is to catch peoples' eyes, to show *just* what games can do. "We've got the big screens in the town centre and we've asked people to create games just for them," explains Simons. "There's nothing to buy here, there are no gates and tickets – there's a reason this is run by a University. At the root of it, we're trying to increase awareness."





Above A particularly geeky spread of stuff on one table at GameCity in Notts.



Below Despite being held across a plethora of venues, GameCity accommodates the mixing of visitors and designers, creating a comfortable, friendly atmosphere lacking at other events.

And it seems to work – the festival is resonant with an enthusiastic vibe, one lost in the myriad booths of TGS or E3. The festival is open to any indie developers wanting to show their games; you'll see first-time designers sit next to their demo cabinets, industry veterans walk around playing games that have existed for no longer than two months. It's a hobbyist event, designed to bring together people with a deep and genuine interest in game design and pushing the industry forward.

"GameCity's open-door policy is the thing that's become the core of the show," Simons explains, "I don't think we've ever had to turn a game away, and that's very much the philosophy of what we do here."



" Part of the virtue of this event is that you can go out into the city and explore it at your own pace, stumbling onto things completely by surprise "

Iain Simons, GameCity Director



COMMAND & CONQUER, ONCE CANCELLED, WILL NOW LIVE AGAIN IN THE LEAST EXCITING COMEBACK EVER

COAST TO COAST

with Gray Nicholson



GTA Online is a wonderful ideal, spoiled by the poorest elements of the fan base



On a clear November afternoon, a man steps out of a car, heading for his apartment building. He moves quickly; the city, with its immaculate skyscrapers and blue skies, is beautiful, but unsafe. Before he makes it inside, a stranger appears with an assault rifle and shoots him dead. Through six more cycles of death and rebirth, the same stranger executes the same man until at last the man reaches the blue plasma cylinder on the flagstones that warps him safely home, thirty floors up.

This is life in the open on *GTA Online*'s public servers. If you meet someone you don't know, they will instinctively try to kill you using everything in their power, without a moment's pause to perhaps test the waters: friend or foe? A dispiriting state of affairs for friends and I who had dreamt of broad camaraderie, a shared sense of adventure in this city of mind-boggling opportunity for freeform fun.

This isn't deathmatch. There's no leaderboard and no loot – everyone quickly learned to bank their cash to avoid losing it. You are targeted because you are available. What a troubling certainty, that a stranger most likely wants you dead.

What a troubling certainty, that a stranger most likely wants you dead

An online death is impermanent, but a hindrance, an inconvenience. Why, given the chance to annoy someone, is that exactly what most people tend to do? Discussion forums and nice waxy magazines give a distorted view of your fellow gamers. They are not civilized, thoughtful sorts who appreciate art and discovery. They're rabid, aggressive monsters for whom every moment is an opening for vacant, slobbering dominance.

Is this how they would act in a real city without laws or consequences? Just shooting everyone, eliminating all other lifeforms, no compulsion to connect, communicate and share? Just triumph, destroy, be the last left alive? Sounds lonely.

A number of studies show that a sense of anonymity encourages indulgence in morally iffy behavior. Trick-or-treaters monitored surreptitiously for one 1976 paper were more likely to steal money and candy when wearing masks and disguises versus those whose costumes did not obscure their faces. A University of Toronto study a few years ago showed that participants tended to cheat on simple tests that netted them a few dollars, if given dimly lit rooms. It doesn't take much for our ethics to begin slipping away: a later phase of that study found that subjects simply provided with dark glasses, creating the most illusory and subjective sense of distance and darkness, would share cash unfairly, in contrast with those given clear glasses.

The 'Online Disinhibition Effect', as described by John Suler of Rider University, NJ, tries to explain people's outlandish behavior online in contrast with their quiet personal lives, and cites all you would imagine, from dissociation to distance to invisibility. Witness Google's recent attempt to counteract this heady cocktail by pushing users to post under their real names instead of pseudonyms on YouTube's infamously poisonous comment fields.

The research reveals under what conditions normal people turn into assholes, but not why; the opportunity, not the reason. Carl Jung suggested a pitiless dark aspect of the unconscious, which he called the Shadow, lives within all of us, an ancient engine driving selfish instincts like lust, greed and violence, once necessary to survive, now repressed beneath the civility of the day-to-day, and prone, now and again, to pop out. "The less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life," he said during a Yale lecture in 1937, "the blacker and denser it becomes." Which I think means our passive, exploratory crew is providing cheap therapy for everyday Joes who have no other outlet to blow off steam (and heads). People emboldened behind gamertags like masks.

For the sake of humanity, I can take a few bullets to the head. At the same time, I can't deny disappointment that human nature keeps something more fraternal and cooperative out of reach.



GTA Online sadly exposes you to the parts of the game's audience you could do without.

Gray Nicholson is a former videogames journalist who now resides in America, acknowledging his roots as he sees fit

Five Things About

Volume

Mike Bithell is young, enthusiastic and perceptive – after enjoying success with breakout hit *Thomas Was Alone*, he became something of an indie megastar. *Volume* is a game about fame, notoriety and the industry itself. Bithell sells the game as a "stealth game about being heard", and that theme seems reminiscent in his attitude both to development and storytelling. We sat down with Mike at Nottingham's GameCity to discuss the ins and outs of *Volume*'s design and philosophy.

1 On going back to pure stealth…
The stealth genre kind of blew up about four or five years ago and since then we've seen massive growth in those games, but as they've branched out, a lot of games put emphasis on the action route. For me, that diminishes the stealth's importance and changes the way that the game's played. I wanted to go back to a purer stealth; a stealth where you can't kill anyone – you *have* to be sneaky.

2 On 'being heard'…
It's about the rich/poor divide, it's about fame, and what that does to people. *Volume* is a modern-day retelling of Robin Hood; you're a petty thief who's on the run and you happen upon something called the Volume – a training simulator for the guards of the rich. It has an internet connection, so basically your character becomes the first crime Let's Play-er. Your character starts streaming online, showing people how to rob the richest people in the world.

3 On the anonymity of *Volume*'s protagonist…
I don't think facial animation gives us anything in games. By removing that – like Daredevil's heightened sense of hearing – it forces you to pay more attention to what we're doing with voiceover, sound design and music. Having masked characters can have more of an emotional effect, because you haven't got the face distracting you. It's partly that, and partly that I can't afford facial capture [laughter].

4 On sound design…
I was never happy with *Thomas Was Alone*'s sound – the sound design and the feel of it and everything, I did that. And it was rubbish. With *Volume,* "How does this world feel to interact with?" has been more at the forefront: what does it sound like going into cover, what are the sound of the footsteps? I brought on a guy called Chris Randall, who's doing a fantastic job – he did all of the sound effects for the Eurogamer demo in about a week.

5 On fans remixing levels…
Level editors [were] the most requested feature in *Thomas Was Alone*, and it wasn't something I could do in that game because it was made in such a haphazard way that a level editor would break and fall apart instantly. So I wanted to put it in the game. Also, I'm very interested in the way stories change and are adapted and retold, which is kind of the theme of the game.

> "Volume is a training simulator for the guards of the rich. It has an internet connection, so basically your character becomes the first crime Let's Play-er"
> Mike Bithell



Paying more for next-gen games

➔ **If a game is cheaper on an older platform, do you begrudge paying for the extra money for what is essentially the same thing? games™'s readers react to the price of next-gen releases…**

Given that Xbox 360/PS3 games launched at around £49.99, and then gradually dropped over the years, I fully expect the same to be true of the next-gen consoles too.
Benjamin Mark Willbery, Facebook

I'm hoping they stay the same. If they go up, I wont be bothering to buy new releases as much.
@Patient62482, Twitter

I'd be happy to pay a bit more than last gen, but probably not more than £50.
@PikaPies, Twitter

I'm not expecting them to stay the same (at least during the first couple of months) and neither am I willing to spend more. Hence why I'm waiting. I like Microsoft's idea of asking a bit less for mid-tier games like *Killer Instinct* and *Crimson Dragon* though.
Joël Hartmann, Facebook

I'd stretch to £50, but wouldn't be happy about it.
@CaptSoftHands, Twitter

I can remember buying *Resident Evil 2* for £39.99 in 1998. £40 for *Skyrim* was a no brainer, but the trend for new games to have 4-5 hour campaigns is where the problem lies. The RRP is long overdue a price increase so expect the next gen to retail at £50.
Thomas Marshall, Facebook

Physical price will go up, but should offer extras in the box to compensate.
@merman1974, Twitter

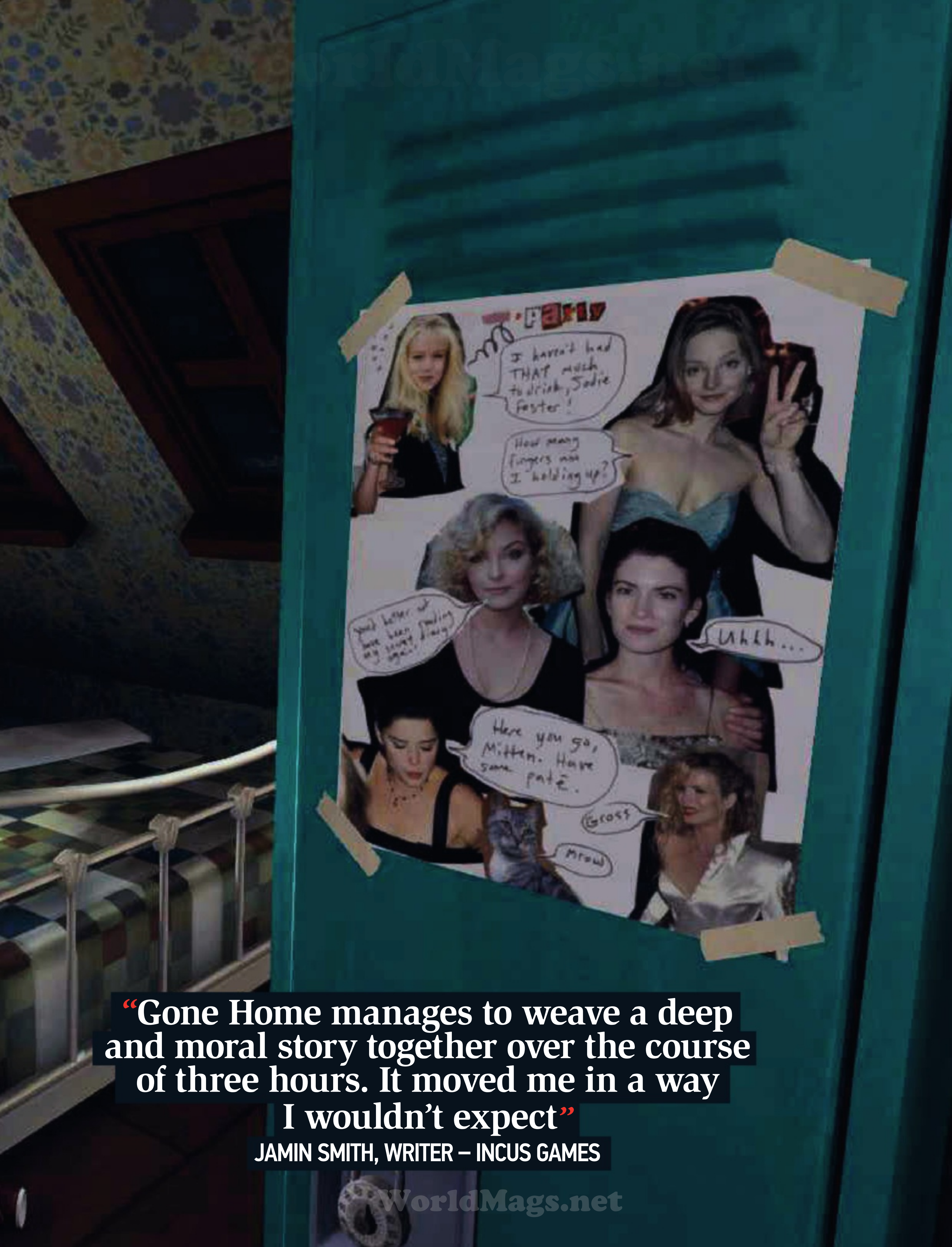


WHY I ❤...

Gone Home

JAMIN SMITH, WRITER – INCUS GAMES

I played Gone Home *in a single sitting, and it was one of the most powerful experiences I've had with a game in some time. There are no characters in the game in a visual sense – the whole story is painted with what is essentially a diary entry and voice-over, and [the developers] manage to weave a deep and moral story together over the course of a three-hour period. It moved me in a way I wouldn't expect – you usually expect these narratively-driven games to have very vivid characters that are brought to life through visuals and such, but* Gone Home *gave you something that you put together in your own head. It really did something special – I'd recommend it to anyone.*



"Gone Home manages to weave a deep and moral story together over the course of three hours. It moved me in a way I wouldn't expect"

JAMIN SMITH, WRITER – INCUS GAMES

KILLING SKYRIM

THE FIRST OPEN-WORLD RPG TO LAND ON NEXT-GENERATION CONSOLES, CD PROJEKT RED TELLS GAMES™ HOW THE DARK FANTASY WORLD OF THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT WILL CHANGE THE GENRE FOR GOOD

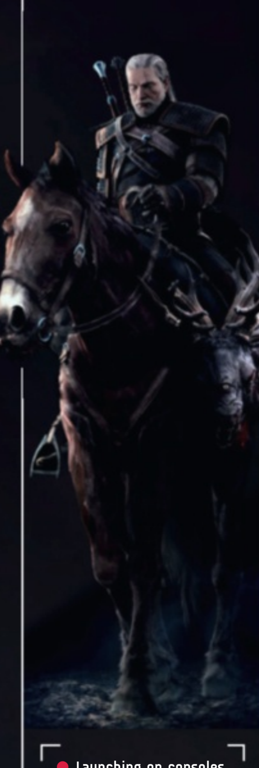
The *Witcher* franchise has always appeared to be defined as much by the events that players don't see as it is by those that are actually experienced. The wilderness is a harsh beast willing to challenge the moral fibre of this fantasy tale's antihero Geralt, spawning endless consequences that echo throughout his journey traversing the mythical realm in which the story takes place. Unlike the majority of celebrated fantasy literature, there's no black-and-white good versus evil tale, and the villain trying to annihilate the world isn't telegraphed by the sharpened fangs hanging from a goliath's maw, nor is it a flaming eye piercing the blackened skyline. Therefore, it's not always obvious which path you should walk; there's no pendulum swinging between positive and negative determined by the choices Geralt makes, and you won't see the continued toil of these decisions reflected in any sort of physical transformation. Beloved characters perish, while others continue to fight by your side; friends become enemies, and some of the most frightening monsters you face often turn out to be human.

While most developers eagerly create choices, CD Projekt RED has created a *world*, the state of which organically moulds itself around the consequences of the player's actions. You will never see everything that the *Witcher* series has to offer, but then, your journey feels uniquely your own.

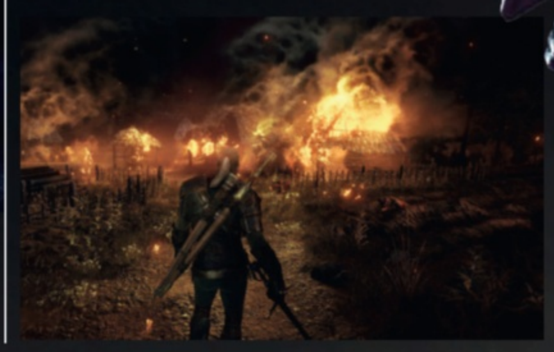
"You don't even want to know how much work that takes," laughs Maciej Szcześnik, lead gameplay designer on *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. "Really. We're making a game with 36 different possible endings, 12 world states and three fully playable epilogues. And all this is powered by your choices and is interconnected. If you want to get the scope of it, picture this: 100 hours of gameplay, a ton of quests and decisions to be made. Imagine the time needed to put all this into one coherent piece. Yes, you don't even want to know."

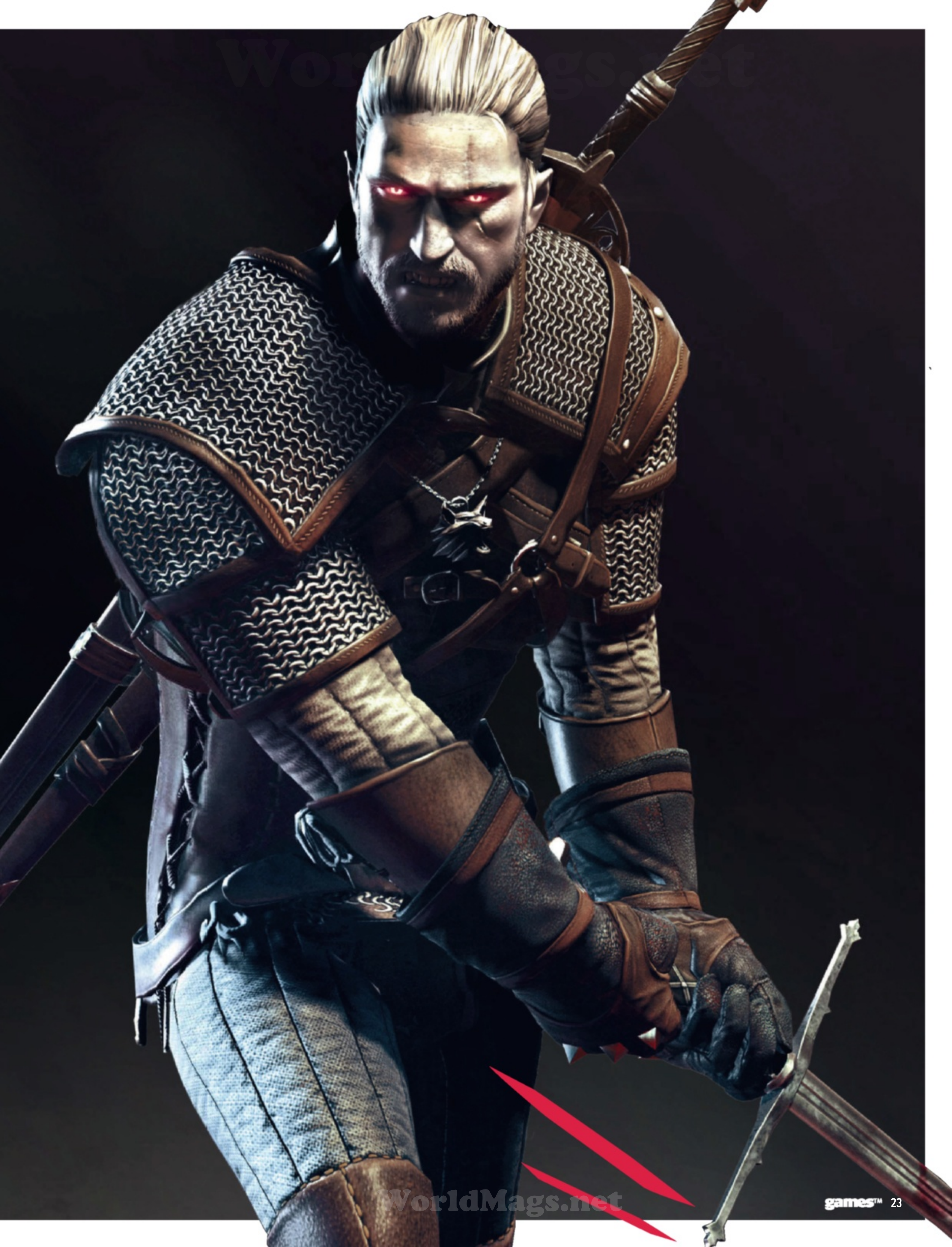
As the last part of the trilogy, it promises a fittingly epic conclusion to Geralt of Rivia's story, not to mention the journey taken by the studio itself over the past decade. The independent Polish studio has grown enormously from its inauspicious origins as a distributor, branching into videogame development in 2002 after dalliances in the localisation market and a brief flirtation with porting console games to PC (the predominant format in Poland). 2007's *The Witcher* was CD Projekt RED's inaugural release, the most expensive game developed in Poland at the time, using BioWare's Aurora Engine and with the majority of the development team learning the ropes as it went along. Flying by the seat of their pants, the company hit a bumpy »

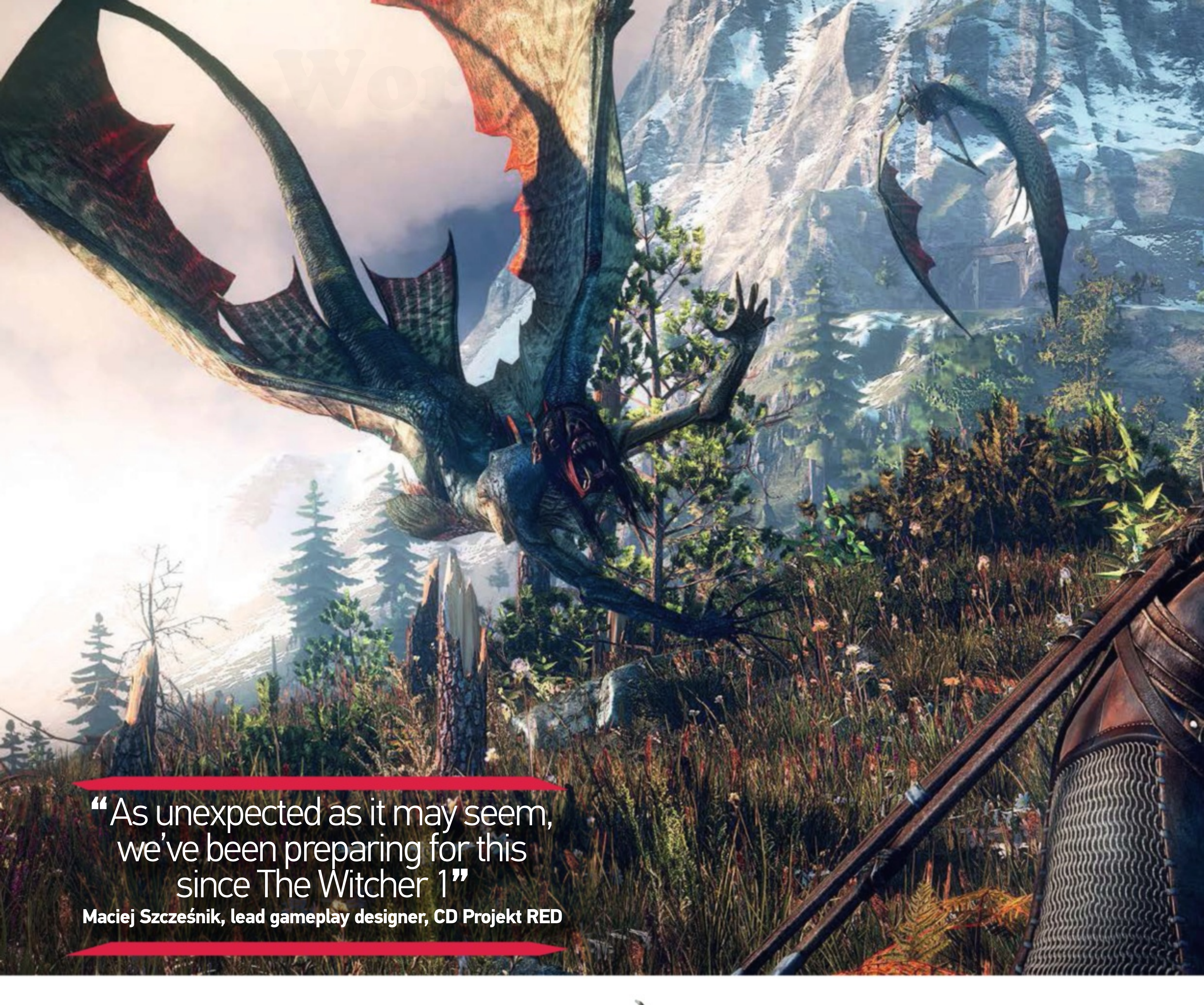




Launching on consoles at the same time is a huge deal for a PC-centric studio like CD Projekt RED.







“As unexpected as it may seem, we’ve been preparing for this since The Witcher 1”
Maciej Szcześnik, lead gameplay designer, CD Projekt RED

road following the release of *The Witcher*, abandoning a console port (titled *Rise Of The White Wolf*) after a significant cash injection and beginning development of the PC sequel blind on an untested new engine.

It paid off, though. *The Witcher 2: Assassins Of Kings* was a more confident product, pushing the storytelling to new heights within a richer and more receptive world. Crucially, the PC release was followed nearly a year later by the franchise’s graceful bow onto consoles, which was facilitated by the studio’s own proprietary tech.

The ambition of the studio continues to swell alongside its international recognition. Being released on PC, PlayStation 4 and Xbox One simultaneously, it boasts the developer’s first expansive open-world setting that not only dwarfs the size of its predecessor, but also weighs in at about 20 per cent bigger than the land mass of its cultural touchstone, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. As an indie studio that is undeniably on the upswing, surely the thought of taking on some of the biggest studios in the world is a daunting one?

“As unexpected as it may seem, we’ve been preparing for this since *The Witcher*,” Szcześnik tells **games™**. “We always wanted to make an open-world game, but we also wanted to make super-quality RPGs, and this takes both patience and resources. Over the course of our previous games we’ve gained the necessary experience, technology and creative force to push us into the next generation with a bang. We’ve bolstered many departments with really creative people who have tons of fresh ideas and knowledge, and we have the means to back them up. It’s time to do an open-world game that tells a story like no other.”

The Witcher 3 doesn’t just bring about the close to Geralt’s story; it marks the end of an era for CD Projekt RED who, through the *Witcher* series, has become one of the most propitious and fascinating developers working today.

CD Projekt RED will tell you that it’s not creating a game, but crafting a story. For all the majesty of *Skyrim*’s Scandinavian-flavoured world, the mainline plot was relatively short, the immersive nature of its sublimely crafted snow-drenched landscape and the dynamic nature of its denizens compensating for its narrative brevity. CD Projekt RED predicts that the central story of *The Witcher 3* will take around 50 hours to



Geralt's animations have had an obvious overhaul, and represent some of the most visually awe-inspiring elements of what we've seen of *The Witcher 3* so far.

conquer, following Geralt as he fends off the invading forces of the Empire of Nilfgaard currently pillaging the Northern Kingdom, while searching for the sorceress Yennefer of Vengerberg – his lost love who he hopes will bring him serenity. But he's also investigating the emergence of the Wild Hunt – a fearsome supernatural race, led by the King of the Wild Hunt, and something of an omen of death and destruction – to which Geralt's destiny appears intrinsically tied to.

Szcześnik explains that pushing the darker fantasy elements to create a grimmer atmosphere is all in keeping with the source material of Andrzej Sapkowski's books of the same name: "The whole world presented as in both the books and the games is very gritty and dark. It's not the kind of kindergarten fantasy that's become kind of typical to the genre. At its core, the game world is very brutal and bathed in all the shades of grey. There's no right or wrong here; it's eat or be eaten, win or die. And when it comes to Geralt, well, he's really motivated to get the job done. This time his motivation is deeply personal."

There are other machinations that spur Geralt to investigate the terrors that lurk in the darkest recesses of the fantasy realm. One of the benefits of the mystical Witch Hunt spreading their wretchedness (not to mention dark magic) across the land is the arrival of over 80 new monsters waiting to be tracked and slaughtered for a tidy profit. For Geralt, the bounty hunter business is certainly booming.

Each of these encounters, while not part of the main storyline, represents a significant undertaking in itself. The majority of enemies lurking among the shadows are feral by nature, which means that it won't be a straight sword fight for Geralt. Instead, each will have its own unique attack patterns, and Geralt will need to identify their weaknesses to bring them down. Using Witcher Senses – one of the game's new abilities that resembles the *Barman: Arkham* series' Detective Mode – weak points will be highlighted, which can be as specific as limbs that need to be removed. Again, similarly to *Arkham*, Geralt can also piece together grisly events that have occurred, replaying them to kick-start an investigation and a new side quest.

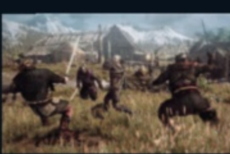
We've seen both of these in action during an extended presentation that involved tracking a woodland creature known as a Leshen. For the most part it was a case of following the trail and dispensing of the creature in a specific manner. However, it was the way that the local community interacted with Geralt during his enquiries that impressed most. Several members of the local village express their beliefs as to why the Leshen is terrorising their land, slaughtering innocents within a twisted net of tangled tree branches. There are not a million different resolutions to this side quest, but the few that are available offer unexpected twists and credible repercussions rippling through the rest of your time within that world.

CD Projekt RED has said that the side quests will double the play time, and it's down to the organic nature of exploration that makes travelling the world – which takes roughly 40 minutes from one side to another on horseback – a meaningful pursuit.

SILVER FOR MONSTERS, IRON FOR HUMANS

Bringing speed and finesse to the combat systems in The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

The *Witcher* series has a heritage for original, if initially tricky, combat systems, but with *The Witcher 3*, CD Projekt RED is hoping to make it the most rounded set of mechanics yet. There's a plethora of tweaks and changes, such as the ability to take potions during combat or double the amount of Signs you can use. These are mostly minor changes, but what is most interesting is the way Geralt's stance has been updated. Stance changing has always been a key part of combat, but here it'll be a little more dynamic. For example, when in battle with a single enemy Geralt will look less threatened than when he's up against a group. A single enemy is nothing, and so this system will be used to know whether you're up against a tougher – or weaker – opponent. The attacks have been tweaked too, so that each button press counts as an attack, rather than the parry/counter system of the original. Even dodges and rolls have been changed, replaced with pirouettes for evasion, while parrying is a more active – and accessible – affair, more in line with *Assassin's Creed*'s counter/attack system.



Counter-attacking will certainly makes fights more dynamic.



"In the Slavic mythos from which the game also draws inspiration, adventure is always around the corner," says Szcześnik of the distractions littered across *The Witcher 3*'s continent. "You don't have to venture on a quest to another part of the world to have the adventure of your life. Our idea of a living world is one that is dripping with stories that want to be experienced; stories that want to be told and listened to. They don't necessarily have to be grand tales of saving the world; sometimes they're very intimate or emotional. And they're always very different. This is what fuels gamers to explore the world we're presenting. In *The Witcher 3*, adventure is always within reach."

The world in *The Witcher 3* is 35 times bigger than what you saw in *The Witcher 2: Assassins Of Kings*… and that was a pretty big game itself," exclaims Szcześnik. "Because of this, it's more difficult to build environments simply because of the scale. Gamers can now see more of the Continent, which has many diverse environments – the rocky Skellige archipelago, the murky and war-ravaged No Man's Land and the beautiful yet corrupted Novigrad."

Unsurprisingly, this has proven to be the biggest challenge for the studio in comparison to its work on *The Witcher 2*. *The Witcher 3*'s world has been created on an unprecedented scale, but that's not to say the minor details have been overlooked. Expected systems, such as day and night cycles and dynamic weather simulation, help reinforce the fantasy, but they converge in impressive fashion; for instance, a storm batters and tosses Geralt about as he travels between islands by boat during an unsettled evening.

It will also have a dramatic effect on the surrounding area: the neighbouring villagers will retreat to local beer halls and busy themselves with something other than standing outside in the pouring rain. Even with the heightened production values, the way in which CD Projekt RED has approached building a tangible world, in which both the mythology and characters feel believable, and even intimate, is indicative of its uncompromising indie spirit.

Szcześnik explains how fundamental it was to make every object person feel like it belongs in its place: "When we create something for the world, we make sure that it fits its context in terms of geography (for example, a village in the swamps would be made mostly of wood, while one situated in rocky and treeless highlands would be made of stone), culture (in a merchant town people advertise their wealth, often ostentatiously, through the way they dress and via luxurious architecture), economic situation, lore, etc. Even though this is a fantasy universe, we want it to be

The quality of the scriptwriting in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* will be crucial to the success of the story, after a few clunky instances in the second game, particularly when it came to the depiction of female characters.

STRANGER THAN FICTION

What happened to Geralt before the videogames got involved?



BLOOD OF ELVES (1994)

Beginning long before Geralt's amnesia in the original *Witcher*, *Blood Of Elves* introduces the White Wolf, the witchers and Ciri – or Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon – a young princess on Cintra with innate magical powers. The story tells of Ciri's desire to understand her power, and of Geralt's protection over the ward. This book also introduced Triss Merigold and Yennefer, Geralt's ex-lover who is only indirectly mentioned in the games, but is promised to return in *The Witcher 3*.



TIMES OF CONTEMPT (1995)

Continuing where *Blood Of Elves* left off, *Times Of Contempt* furthers Ciri's attempts to understand her unusual magic under the guidance of Yennefer, a sorceress even more powerful than Triss. They – alongside Geralt – attend a reunion of mages on Thanedd Island that resulted in a coup initiated by Nilfgaardian mages, led by a powerful mage named Vilgefortz, who is looking to capture Ciri. We will never meet this antagonist in the games, since Geralt kills him before he gets amnesia.



BAPTISM OF FIRE (1996)

This book introduced a number of characters seen in the games, as well as others that did not survive. During the Thanedd coup, Geralt is severely injured and rests in the Brokilon forest, where he meets Dandelion. After recovering and setting out in search for Ciri, Geralt meets the dwarf Zoltan Chivay, the 'Black Rider' Cahir and a vampire by the name of Regis. The troupe take part in the Battle for the Bridge on the Yaruga, after which Geralt is knighted Geralt of Rivia.



THE SWALLOW'S TOWER (1997)

During *Baptism Of Fire*, Ciri joins a criminal group called Rats, a Robin Hood-like gang. At this point, Ciri witnesses – and begins to relish being involved in – a lot of killing. *The Swallow's Tower* focuses on Ciri's life during this time, where she regales the events of the Rats and how they are slain at the hand of Leo Bonhart to scholar and physician Vysogota. Ciri's adventures later earn her the ability to control time and space, but it's not yet clear if she will finally show up in *The Witcher 3*.

"The story is always the most important part of the experience for us"
Maciej Szcześnik, lead gameplay designer, CD Projekt RED


A difference in enemies across environments would go some way to heightening the immersion of *The Witcher 3*'s world.

plausible and realistic – to have people believe that, even though it's a fantasy world, this place could exist. The same goes for characters; we want them to behave like real people, minding their own business, having their own goals and aims. They will talk, think and act differently depending on their cultural background, life experiences and character."

We ask whether it was challenging to create a unifying art direction over such a massive, varied landscape, uniting disparate parts of the world together. The answer is, quite simply, a case of returning to the source material. "It depends on how you look at it," muses Szcześnik. "On one hand, we have a lot of creative freedom and we're not afraid to experiment. On the other, we need to stay faithful to all the books. Sapkowski's novels, the source of the game world, provide quite a lot in terms of art direction. They specify the general look and feel of places and monsters and are something we can always resort to or have in the back of our minds. But there's a lot of stuff the books don't specify, and here's where the super-creative people from the art department kick in. We have brainstorming sessions and frequently quarrel over how stuff »

BOTTLING IT

Alchemy has been streamlined so it's not quite as arduous as before. For example, now you can quaff a preparatory potion ahead of a battle, but activate it only when you need it. Healing potions, too, can be used in combat.

SIXTH SENSE

Upgrades to Geralt's Witcher Sense means you will be able to use *Batman: Arkham*'s Detective Mode style alternate vision to locate important otherworldly details – such as a spirit beast's hidden totems – to aid you in the inevitable battle.

ON YOUR HEAD BE IT

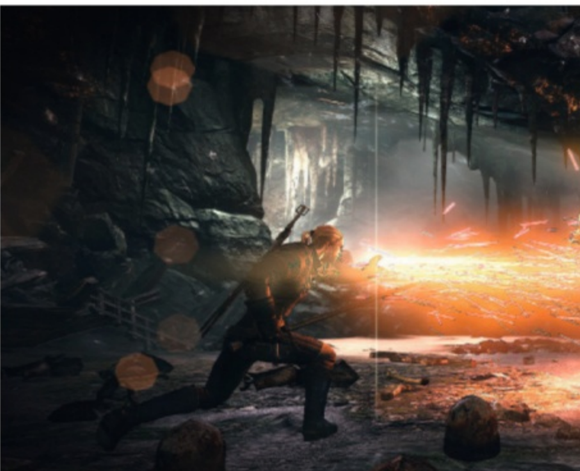
It wouldn't be *The Witcher* without decisions, and true to form that grey area of morality isn't always clear. Maybe your 'greater good' doesn't turn out so grand, and though you won't find out the results of your decision immediately, know that there will be repercussions.

PEOPLE PERSON

As part of any side-quest, you will need to gather information, whether that's as simple as locating the monster's last known location or quizzing a local village on the real truth of the situation, which could ultimately affect the way you want to tackle any given situation.



Enemies vary in size, with the revamped combat mechanics of Geralt allowing for much faster battles during the game.



ANATOMY OF THE WITCHER 3

Side-quests are more than aimlessly busy jobs; here, they matter as much as the main quest

PICK YOUR PREY

There are over 80 types of monsters in *The Witcher 3*, each of them uniquely created beasts with various lore and strategies involved in finding them. Some quests will have you fighting them, while others require you to prevent the damage they might deal. Either way, you'll need to prepare.

should look like, but because of the great communication processes we managed to develop in the studio, maintaining a coherent art direction is not an impossible task."



It's clear that CD Projekt RED is confident about what it has set out to achieve with *The Witcher 3.* And as it draws to a close on a trilogy of titles that evolved in parallel with the developer itself, we can't help but wonder what sort of impact this has all had on its next venture, an adaptation of the classic pen and paper role-playing game, *Cyberpunk 2077*.

"From a technical standpoint, the experience gained developing *The Witcher 3* on next-gen will definitely pay off when we work on *Cyberpunk 2077*," reveals Szcześnik. "Along with the rest of the world, we're pioneering the next generation. We did not have access to the systems from day one of development, so some decisions had to be made based on estimates of what the new consoles can do. Each grain of knowledge we get now will pay off in the future."

It's an elusive statement, but the truth is that the future noir of *Cyberpunk 2077* isn't a huge leap from the world it has created with *The Witcher*. Both share themes of terrorism, social inequality and duplicitous authorities, despite the atmospheric touch of European mythology to *The Witcher 3* and the *Blade Runner*-esque dystopia touted in *Cyberpunk 2077* being complete polar opposites.

But as Szcześnik highlighted earlier, the thing the two have most in common is the platforms they're releasing on, namely PlayStation 4 and Xbox One. It was a task that would demand a new engine – the third iteration of REDengine, which only debuted with *The Witcher 2* in 2011 – that enabled the studio to enhance the world's visual details, from the stunning vistas to character mannerisms. Above all, it facilitated a new approach to the console RPG.

> "When it comes to Geralt, well, he's really motivated to get the job done. This time his motivation is deeply personal"
>
> **Maciej Szcześnik, lead gameplay designer, CD Projekt RED**

"We wanted to put as much force as we could into the punch that, we hope, will change the RPG genre for a long time," says Szcześnik. "Both consoles are wonderful pieces of hardware and allow us to go crazy on the visuals and gameplay ideas. This next generation of hardware will mean a next generation of graphics and storytelling in open-world RPGs."

It has certainly helped that the lack of direct competition at this point in time has gained *The Witcher 3* a much broader pre-release recognition than either of its predecessors. Not that Szcześnik suggests any pressure is felt within the studio: "We want to make an extremely good RPG for next-gen platforms," he says. "Our intention is to convince people that it's a revolutionary game not because it's the only game available, but because it's truly good. Will it help? It might, but we're not thinking about it – we're making the best game we can, not wishing there's no competition when we launch. That would be stupid, because there's always *another* game, be it RPGs, strategy, sports or shooters; it's not like gamers play one genre only. In terms of our audience, I hope it reaches everyone who values a good story in a mature environment. The story is always the most important part of the experience for us, but this time around combat could stand on its own so even action-orientated gamers will like it."

There's no firm release date set, but we wouldn't expect it to arrive in the first half of 2014. When we discuss some of the other advancements in the sequel – a less newbie-alienating introduction to the mechanics, how alchemy will function and the more nuanced and graceful changes to combat – it's clear that the studio is still figuring out how all the pieces will slot together. "We're still experimenting," admits Szcześnik when we move onto discussing what the interface will look like in the final build. Yet, the news doesn't come as much of a surprise. After all, this is a studio that has built its success clinging onto the edge of its seat, constantly iterating and refining all the way to the finish line. It's encouraging that while the beasties grow more fearsome, the world more imposingly stunning and Geralt older and wiser, that everything that goes on behind the scenes to create the final chapter in the *Witcher* trilogy – the stuff that you don't see – remains the same as it has always been.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 4
Origin: America
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer: Ready At Dawn
Release: 2014
Genre: Action Adventure
Players: TBA

Developer Profile

Ready at Dawn Studios is the result of ex-Naughty Dog and Blizzard staff combining their creative output back in 2003. The company is most well known for its work on the PSP versions of *God Of War*.

High Point

God Of War: Ghost Of Sparta proved the PSP was a console in its own right, pushing graphical fidelity to achieve some of the best visuals we've seen on the handheld.

Developer History

God Of War: Origins Collection
2011 [PS3]
Okami [Port]
2008 [Wii]
Daxter
2006 [PSP]

The Order: 1886

CONCEPT ■ A third-person shooter set in an alternate-history London, riddled with unnatural forces and lethal steampunk weaponry.

London calling to the zombies of death

The cloying, smog-ridden streets of Victorian London have seen some of the most perceptive studies of human nature in fiction; whether it's been in battles against our darker selves in Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, resisting the allure of the supernatural in Dracula or unpicking the mysteries of the city in Sherlock Holmes. The murky districts of 1800s London have proved to be an apt canvas for painting atmospheric pictures of humanity struggling against adversity. *The Order: 1886* is set to continue this, establishing an alternate timeline within the city where the eponymous Order are in the midst of a clandestine crusade against an ancient, seemingly Lovecraftian foe. Victorian London has become the de facto realm for any steampunk narrative, but *The Order* looks like it will bring a legitimate atmosphere to the well-walked cobbled streets of Whitechapel and Mayfair with a purpose-built engine that 'shoots' the game, the way a film camera would.

The game is supposedly inspired by the *Uncharted* series – particularly by that perched feeling of anticipation you had throughout *Uncharted 2*; that pure entertainment factor the game allowed for: film-like immersion and absorption. Talking about creating an immersive environment for players is quickly becoming an easy topic for developers to brag about, but Ready At Dawn knows that next-generation visuals alone are not the key to keeping a player in its game; an engaging experience needs more, and they're promising *The Order: 1886* will be something completely outside what we're expecting. We're looking forward to seeing more about the game – if it can deliver on that promise, then *The Order* could be to the PS4 what the *Uncharted* series was to the PS3.

BREAK ON THROUGH TO THE OTHER SIDE

■ WE WERE recently shown a tech demo of the engine powering *The Order* – our character walked into a purpose-built room filled with wooden structures and we were given free reign to, well, destroy *everything*. Each texture breaks apart like it should – wood splinters, metal buckles, and (we assume) flesh rips.



AGAINST THE GRAIN

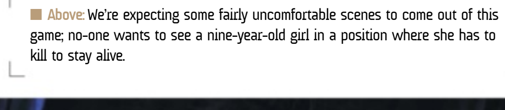
■ READY AT Dawn is keen to make the game as filmic as possible – perhaps another cue taken from its *Uncharted* inspiration – and one of the ways it aims to achieve that level of cinematic parallelism is by 'shooting' the game through in-engine lenses. This gives everything a sort-of celluloid vignette effect; a film grain that is completely at one with the Victorian aesthetic of the game. Better yet, this in-engine visual sorcery is completely separate from any game mechanics, meaning you'll get a game that looks like a film, but still plays like a game.

GRAVEMAKERS AND GUNSLINGERS

■ BEING A strait-laced, story-driven third-person shooter, *The Order* sadly won't allow you to explore all of London. Alas, what is lost in scale will be made up for in character development, we hope. Centring on a cast of four Van Helsing-esque demon hunters – armed to the teeth with all manner of mystical marauding equipment – we're expecting a narrative that will fit somewhere between *Gears Of War* and *Left 4 Dead*.

WINNING THE FRANCHISE

IN A QUITE unusual twist, *The Walking Dead* game, which only uses background details of the source material and a couple of character cameos, has actually become the strongest pillar of the franchise. The TV show remains inconsistent and the comic book never quite reaches the same level of depth in characterisation – this is among very few examples where a licensed game manages to exceed the presence in other media, next to *Knights Of The Old Republic*. The burden is now on Telltale to keep Clementine's story compelling in *Season Two*, and to find new angles on this world that perhaps haven't been explored by other outlets to date. The idea of a solo character in this backdrop may do that.



Above: We're expecting some fairly uncomfortable scenes to come out of this game; no-one wants to see a nine-year-old girl in a position where she has to kill to stay alive.





Above: The initial scenario of *The Walking Dead* comic was Rick wandering alone through the landscape, and the potential of that drama bodes well for the second season of the game.

The Walking Dead: Season Two

CONCEPT ■ The second instalment of Telltale's episodic *The Walking Dead* effort mixes things up with a new protagonist.

Alone at the end of the world

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: America
Publisher: Telltale Games
Developer: In-house
Release: Q4 2013
Genre: Adventure
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Founded in 2004, Telltale consists of over 120 staff, including ex-LucasArts designers. Telltale is known for its penchant for releasing games that break down into episodes, and has achieved a reputation as the foremost producer of titles within the graphical adventure genre.

Developer History

The Wolf Among Us **2013 [Multi]**
Tales of Monkey Island **2009 [Multi]**
Sam & Max Save The World **2007 [PC, 360, Wii]**

High Point

One of last year's most prominent successes, *Season One* of *The Walking Dead* made ripples in the games world; its gripping and emotive storytelling cracked open even the hardest of players.

Telltale's *The Walking Dead* was, for many people, that best thing that's ever happened to Robert Kirkman's zombie-centric property. The game established a strong emotive connection with players, shaping Lee Everett into a malleable vessel for players to project their own personalities onto. After finding Clementine, you were hooked – the game put you in a paternal role, and you found yourself hypnotised by how you could handle this isolated, frontier-inspired relationship.

It's dangerous, then, to shift the focus of *Season Two* directly onto Clementine – her role in the original season was as a supporting character; a role that was incredibly well realised and manipulated, especially towards the climax. While we understand that a new season will be a separate entity from the original, we were expecting a whole new story arc established elsewhere in Kirkman's bleak American wilderness. *Season Two* is supposedly set a short time after the events of *Season One*, where Clem has had little time to grow up or mature, but probably enough time to become incredibly desensitised to the relentless death that surrounds her. The only confirmed writer of the new season so far is Nick Breckon, who hasn't worked with Telltale on a *Walking Dead* episode until now.

We're concerned, however, that using Clementine as the central character will retroactively take something away from the previous series – if Clem is demonised, or we're given options we feel wouldn't reflect her *Season One* personality, it could cause the tightly knitted world of *The Walking Dead* to unravel, affecting atmosphere, canon and other characters.

/// We have every faith Telltale can pull off this new story, though. So far, the developer has shown incredible respect to the franchise, and *Season Two* will apparently work closely with the TV adaptation to form a more cohesive world, with overlapping characters and mythos. Telltale knows that playing as a young, vulnerable girl in a world full of malignant undead and untrustworthy living will offer up controversial and impactful narrative threads, and seems keen to capitalise on that. It's a role that will "challenge [your] expectations of how to survive in a world where no one can be trusted," according to Telltale CEO Dan Connors.

> "We'll soon be putting players in the shoes of a lead role that will challenge their expectations of how to survive in a world where no one can be trusted"
> DAN CONNORS, CEO TELLTALE GAMES

If no-one can be trusted, then you can expect a Clem to be fighting her way out of a series of pretty grizzly situations. Telltale recently released the first episode of *Fables: The Wolf Among Us*, a game stylistically similar to *The Walking Dead*, but whose combat mechanics hit a lot deeper and perform a lot more responsively than those seen in Telltale's seminal zombie hit. We anticipate the developer bringing what it has learnt from *Fables* over to Clem and crew, making the discrepancy between fight and flight ever more poignant. We expect to see a grotesque cross-section of humanity in *Season Two* – where Lee was assertive and ran on instinct, Clem seems more fragile, uninitiated in the ways of the Darwinian new world she's found herself in. She still clings to the memories of her parents, longing for a better time – a cosy home life whose legacy has left a need for shelter and companionship ingrained in her… she'll play very differently to Lee, that's for sure.

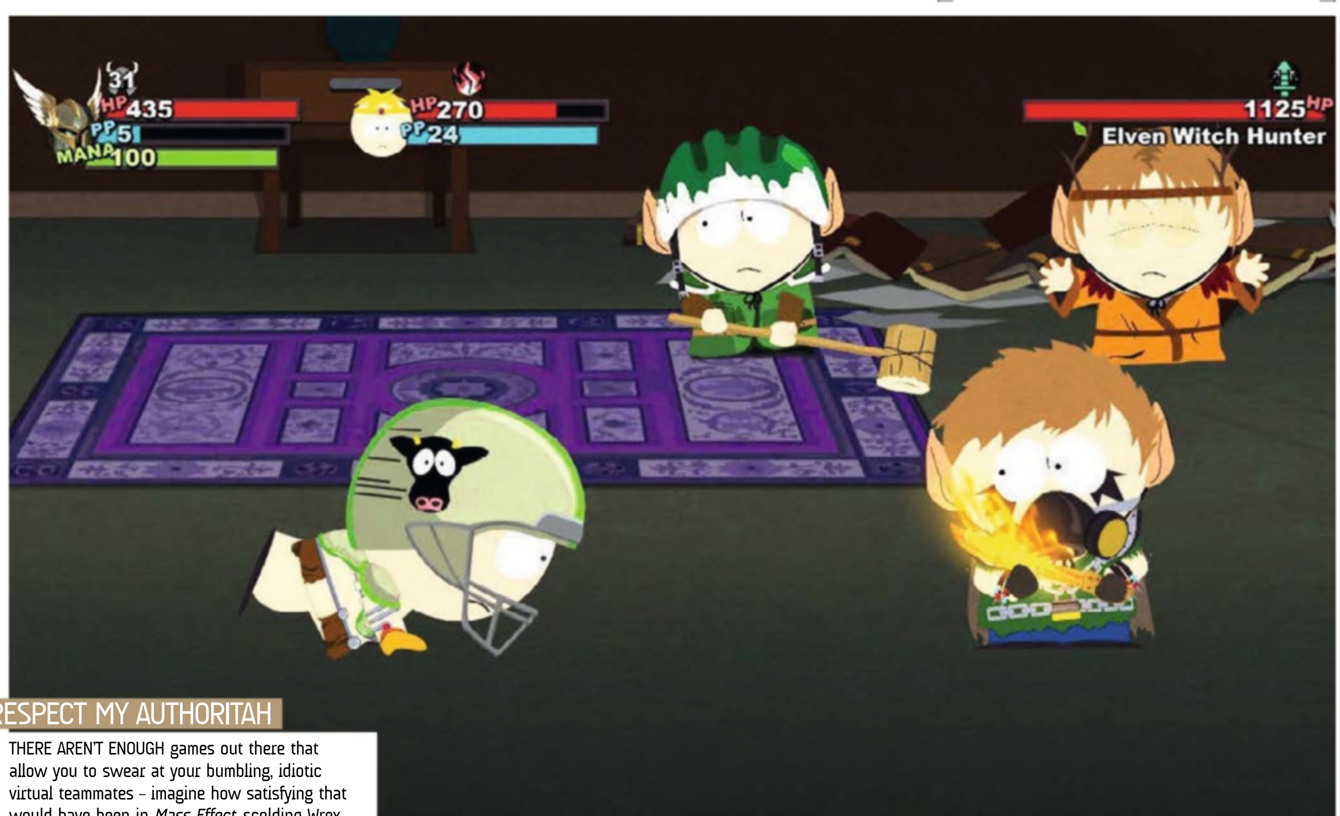
Lee's own legacy will be visible in-game, too; Telltale is promising decisions made in both *Season One* and *400 Days* will carry over and effect the story in Clem's own bid for survival. The game will be presented similarly to *Season One*, with Telltale's trademark focus on adventure-based gameplay forming the core experience and episodes being released roughly six weeks apart. The distinctive art style remains intact, too; the stylised cel-shading looking gorgeous on Telltale's Tool engine – an engine designed to run on as many platforms as possible, meaning the new season will see a release across Vita, 360, PS3, iOS and Windows devices.





■ Above: Expect the game to focus on the truly dark and grizzly sides of humanity, the ultimate result being Clementine's abject loneliness, we assume. It's emotional stuff.

Below: The battle HUD is full of everything you'd expect of any other RPG; moves cost PP, magic costs mana and a character's health is displayed numerically above their head.





RESPECT MY AUTHORITAH

THERE AREN'T ENOUGH games out there that allow you to swear at your bumbling, idiotic virtual teammates – imagine how satisfying that would have been in *Mass Effect*, scolding Wrex for charging headfirst into battle… *again*. Luckily, *The Stick Of Truth* rights that wrong, allowing you to berate the cast of the game (via Kinect) to get responses out of them, depending on which vocal slur you go with, possibly granting buffs to your characters, too. We especially look forward to verbally laying into Cartman's indignant ass. Xbox 360 players will also get special access to otherwise unobtainable DLC, and they'll get to play other DLC packs before anyone else, too. Is that a deal breaker for you?



Right: The minimalism and childish charm of Cartman's backyard acts as a tonally perfect hub-world. Don't tell Ms. Cartman, but we saw a kid urinating in the Pool of Vision…



South Park: The Stick Of Truth

CONCEPT ■ Trey Parker and Matt Stone got offended with all the other low-rate *South Park* games, so they decided to write their own. In traditional RPG style.

Gonna have myself a time

South Park: The Stick Of Truth was due to launch 4 March this year, but since Ubisoft took over publishing duties when THQ folded, the title has suffered consistent delays. We assume the delays are down to Ubi polish; *The Stick Of Truth* has the capacity to be an incredible game – a mix of old-school RPG and scathing *South Park* satire from a developer with the storytelling chops to pull it of – so we hope Ubi is keeping it back until every ounce of potential is squeezed from the strong framework that game operates within.

In a *South Park*-wide LARP the central cast seems to be playing enters the New Kid – you – an entity whose powers have yet to be understood. You're a wild card in *South Park*, new to the inter-class school politics, new to the weirdness, new to the game. You're a blank canvas, and a very valuable asset to every faction looking to get one over on the enemy.

Enter Cartman, the Grand Wizard. He's leading the humans in a campaign against the elves (lead by Kyle, obviously), all in the name of the eponymous Stick of Truth. There are goths, hippies, ginger kids, aliens, underpants gnomes, Canadians and even crab people. It looks like Trey and Matt aren't skimping on the production of this game; every snippet of gameplay we've seen is crowded with references to the *South Park* mythos, both obtuse and acute.

/// The game is a fond pastiche of the traditional RPG too, something Obsidian Entertainment is well versed in. The gameplay is a mix of overworld exploration and battle-screens, and the whole thing looks just like an episode of the TV show (something previous games using the *South Park* IP have fallen down on; the visual representation is as much a part of *South Park* as the boys themselves). Mechanically, this card-on-card style helps the game out, too – battles and exploration both include extensive interaction with the environment, providing contextual opportunities to crawl into hidden bits of the world, set fire to your enemies or unleash some kind of hellish *South Park* summon (we're thinking Moses, or Mr. Hanky). The interactive elements don't stick out with some 'Hi, I'm interactive' sheen like photorealistic games – they're just there, waiting to be fiddled with or farted on (seriously).

The show's incredibly wide cast of characters will be utilised throughout the story and in battles. Even minor players in the grander schemata of the *South Park* realm make pretty handy appearances. The battle system seems to work similarly to old-school turn-based RPGs – two sides face off against each other on either side of the screen, replete with elemental weaknesses, stat attributes, buff moves, weapon-specific attacks… it's all there.

You level up after battles, you can loot the bodies of your victims, use items mid-battle. This is, to all intents and purposes, a legitimate RPG, and the way the game weaves *South Park* lore with RPG mechanics is inspired. Jimmy Bulmer is a bard, for example, whose jaunty little tunes provide damage boosts and defensive buffs to his forces – it's like the genre tropes were made to be satirised by *South Park* all along.

There are field abilities available to your character, too, seemingly obtained via special encounters in the story. One ability, the Nagasaki Fart, is taught by the one and only Randy Marsh and has the potential to thin out enemy numbers in the field with a blast of explosive gas, making encounters in the room more manageable. The move pool of the characters seems incredibly deep – a depth you'd expect from the likes of *Fallout* and *Final Fantasy*, not a licenced *South Park* game.

While it's a shame the game has now suffered over a year of delays, we can't hold it against Obsidian or Ubisoft: we've been consistently surprised by how authentic an RPG *The Stick Of Truth* feels. If we get a full, polished game in March, we think that's a better deal than getting something that needs patching upon release, even if next-gen fever is in overdrive by then.

> "Getting the game up to the crappy standards of the show has been a real challenge and we're excited to say it's taken way longer than we thought it would"
>
> **TREY PARKER, MATT STONE** SOUTH PARK STUDIOS



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS3, Xbox 360, PC
Origin: America
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Obsidian Entertainment
Release: 6 March
Genre: RPG
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Californian-based Obsidian Entertainment began operating in 2003, and is primarily known for its work with other developers' IP and licences, particularly with sequels to established franchises. Obsidian is renowned for its work within the RPG genre, and recently achieved the highest game-based Kickstarter backing for crowd-sourced title *Project Eternity*.

Developer History

Dungeon Siege 3
2011 [PS3, PC, 360]
Alpha Protocol
2010 [PS3, PC, 360]
Neverwinter Nights 2
2006 [Mac, PC]
Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II
2004 [Xbox, PC]

High Point

Fallout: New Vegas provided the perfect antithesis to *Fallout 3*'s drab bleakness; the neon-strips of Vegas explored a side of the post-apocalypse that hasn't been done before or since.



Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII

CONCEPT ■ Lightning is given 13 days to save the souls of those she knows and loves before the world ends and everyone and everything is cast into damnation.

Promising to rectify the mistakes of the series thus far

When you play a *Final Fantasy* game, you don't expect it to be rooted in reality – the series is known for its complete disregard for world-building rules. The universe and lore of *Final Fantasy XIII*, in particular, is a convoluted labyrinth of time-travel and alternate realities, woven together by the titular Lightning's never-ending trials. *Lightning Returns* sees the series longest-running protagonist once again tasked with saving the world, after waking up from a 500 year sleep, initiated at the end of *XIII-2*'s last DLC pack. *Lightning Returns* addresses concerns players had with the prequel – there are far more open spaces to explore and the battle system has been tweaked so it's fresh and challenging, but still familiar enough to be tied to the main *XIII* series. *Lightning Returns* looks likely to be Square Enix's current-gen send-off, so we hope the developer pulls out all the stops to give a fitting end to the series.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS3, Xbox 360
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: In-House
Release: 14 February (Japan: 21 November)
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Square Enix used to be two companies – Square and Enix, both specialising in maths-based isometric RPGs. After the merger, the developer began working outside of its comfort zone – taking the classic JRPG into 3D, solidifying the popularity of series like *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy*.

Developer History

Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance
3DS [2012]
Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together
PSP [2010]
Final Fantasy X-2
PS2 [2003]

High Point

The Last Remnant was a brave, new IP that Square ventured onto Windows platforms; combining hardcore JRPG elements and detailed monster design with a splendidly realised fantasy world.

1 LADY IN RED

A traditional *Final Fantasy* trope is to have a wide cast of characters that fulfil different roles – healers, tanks, mages, warriors and so on. *Lightning Returns* alters that paradigm by way of outfits – in a system similar to *X-2*'s dress-spheres, Lightning can swap between three pre-equipped outfits on-the-fly, determining the abilities and physical attacks she has access to. Each costume runs on Action Points, which regenerate when you've got another costume equipped, so it's important to hit the right balance in your battle wardrobe before you head into the wild. Hence Square Enix cannily using DLC costumes of Yuna and Cloud to give *Lightning Returns* a little more attention.



3



4

"Increased levels of player freedom, customisation and connectivity with the real world will ensure that this concluding chapter will be an exhilarating finale to Lightning's story"

MOTOMU TORIYAMA DIRECTOR, SQUARE ENIX



5

2 HEADS-UP!

The last two instalments of Lightning's journey have kept the battle HUD fairly minimal, tucked away in the bottom corners of the screen. *Lightning Returns* takes a step in the completely opposite direction, with a huge bar that fills the centre of the screen denoting your remaining Action Points, available abilities, health and various other metres relating to the battle. *Lightning Returns* sees you control only Lightning – the in-battle allies and obtainable monsters of the other Fabula Nova Crystallis games are nowhere to be seen, though it appears she's joined by guest characters in battle as part of the overarching story.

3 TIME MANAGEMENT

The main gameplay conceit of *Lightning Returns* focuses on Lightning's inherent time-management skills – because, as everyone knows, if you're going to save the world, punctuality is rather important. The game operates around a 13-day clock, with the world expiring once the countdown's up. However, depending on who she chooses to help and what she chooses to do, Lightning can extend or retract the time allotted to the universe – saving or dooming more innocent souls in the process. No pressure, then. It's another structural difference from previous games, meaning that each entry in the trilogy has its own flavour.

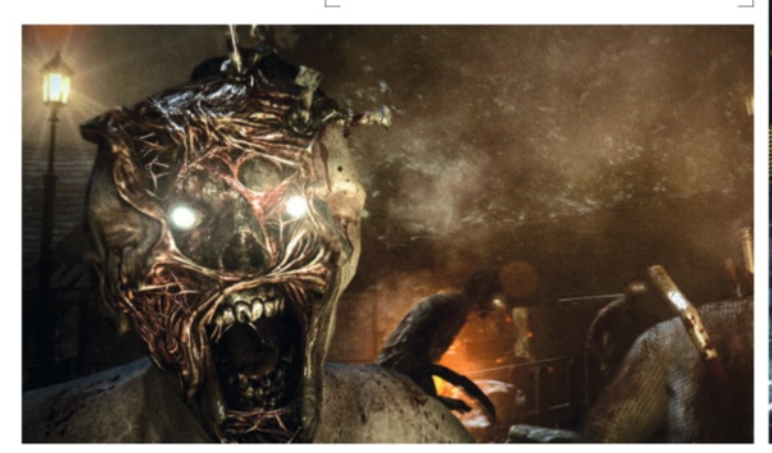
4 A CAST FROM THE PAST

Awaking from a 500-year long crystal stasis, Lightning has no clue what's happened to her world in the half-century she's been dormant. Luckily for her, friends and foes encountered throughout the series so far have somehow lived that long and are keen to either help her out or slice her up; Snow, Fang, Hope, Vanille, Caius, Noel and even chocobo-friendly Sazh are making a return, all re-rendered and orientated in the new world with stories to tell, histories to explore. *Lightning Returns* promises a definitive conclusion to all strands of the myriad *XIII* storylines; that is, if you can even remember all of them, which seems unlikely.

5 A REALM REBORN

Considering Square Enix spent reportedly $65 million on getting *Final Fantasy XIII* out the door, you can't blame anyone for revisiting the same worlds and characters in the sequels, right? *Lightning Returns* at least looks a lot more refined than its predecessors, utilising a bright and varied colour palette and sharp, detailed character models to make everything seem so much more authentic and crisp within the lush and varied environments the game has to offer. From prairie-like settlements to Venetian-inspired towns, this game looks like it'll take us on an epic journey worthy of a *Final Fantasy* title.

■ Below: Fantastical creatures and nasty spins on reality make up the many horror elements of *The Evil Within*, and will hopefully offer variety above anything else.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Bethesda
Developer: Tango Gameworks
Release: 2014
Genre: Horror
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Shinji Mikami
The creator of *Resident Evil* has a remarkable track record of distinctive games with complex, fun mechanics. After Clover Studio was shut down in 2007, Mikami joined many of his former collaborators at Platinum Games where he oversaw development of *Vanquish*. Tango is his latest outfit.

Developer History

Resident Evil
1996 [PlayStation]
Resident Evil 4
2005 [Multi]
God Hand
2007 [PS2]

High Point

God Hand
A side-scrolling beat-'em-up translated into 3D, *God Hand* allowed players to built their own combos, a potentially revolutionary idea that no-one paid attention to.

The Evil Within

CONCEPT ■ Shinji Mikami returns to survival horror. The weak need not apply.

The horror! The horror! The scariest game of 2014

***Resident Evil 2* sold five million copies when it was released in 1998, so you'd be right to point out that there's a massive potential thirst for survival horror out there.** Those people didn't just disappear – they either got alienated by *Resi*'s sideways shift into action or jumped off the wagon when *Silent Hill* became a bland exponent of the ill-founded pro-Western philosophy of Japanese publishers that foolishly led to Team Silent's demise. *The Evil Within* is a return to those values, in some ways, but aiding that revival of survival horror is a contemporary approach to game design.

The Evil Within boasts little that's new, then, but it has plenty of things that have been absent from mainstream games for a while, instead picked up more in the indie space with titles like *Amnesia*, *Outlast* and even *Gone Home* to some extent. It uses music and sound effects to properly spook the player, and isn't afraid to use sinister imagery to throw you off.

In what we've seen of the game so far, it's implied that the scope is far wider than haunted house-style scares – in the prologue, protagonist Sebastian Castellanos is inside an asylum where he's captured and hacked in the leg by a dungeon keeper who wouldn't look out of place next to the bag-wearing chainsaw man from *Resident Evil 4*. By the end of the demo, however, Sebastian escapes the asylum and heads outside into what appears to be the end of the world, so there's lots of potential for the story to be epic as well as intimately scary.

It's notably a lot creepier than recent *Resi* titles, even *Resi 4*, claim to be. In cutscenes, there's still something slightly wry and ever-so-slightly tongue-in-cheek about the voice-acting and characters, yet the scares are real scares. Well-chosen moments of silence, a sense of the unknown and especially impressive, dynamic setpieces that can go a number of ways contribute to this – don't expect enemy encounters to all play out in the same fashion. Some are scripted, like a chase away from the afore-mentioned dungeon keeper, yet it was made very clear to us that combat scenarios are almost like mini-sandboxes where the AI won't always behave the same.

> "My team and I are committed to creating an exciting new franchise, providing fans the perfect blend of horror and action"
> SHINJI MIKAMI TANGO GAMEWORKS

Mikami is a forward-thinking game designer – don't expect a retread or a project that tackles horror in the same way; do expect *The Evil Within* to have its own capacity to surprise and amaze. Rarely has its creator let us down in this respect.



■ Above: The over-the-shoulder view pioneered by *Resident Evil 4* makes a return here, it seems. Amazing the influence it's had on the entire third-person shooter genre – a more important development than the cover system.



■ Left: The story of *Silent Enemy* is based on real Cree mythology – an interesting inspiration that hasn't featured in many games. Below: The Crows seem like an omnipotent force in the game; constantly looking down on you, waiting for any chance they can to cut your quest for springtime short. We think it'll be an method of maintaining tension.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Minority Media
Developer: In-House
Release: 2014
Genre: Adventure
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Minority Media consists of designers that have worked on the *Need For Speed* and *Army Of Two* franchises, apparently frustrated with the direction games are taking. Minority focuses on making games that will speak to players, offering immersive, personal experiences based around real-life issues.

Developer History

Papo & Yo
Multi [2013]

High Point

Using exploration and gargantuan monsters as a metaphor for childhood abuse and a struggle with alcoholism, *Papa & Yo* had players exploring parts of themselves along with the desolate abodes of its desert setting.

Silent Enemy

CONCEPT ■ Placed in the snow-shoes of a peaceful human explorer, players are tasked with helping struggling animals while avoiding the intimidating presence of anthropomorphic crows.

The lad who went to the North Wind

"One day after the launch of *Papo & Yo*, we received a call," explains Tali Goldstein, producer at Minority Media. "We were told we've made the front section of the *New York Times* art section, and we were like 'Really? Are we art? Cool!'" Minority Media recently made waves with their first major release – *Papo & Yo*, a game revolving around childhood disassociation and escapism. It's an emotional game, one built on the experiences of Minority's team. The lessons learnt in the production of *Papo & Yo* seem to be vital in concocting the studio's next release: *Silent Enemy*.

"We want to push the industry further – we are not interested in doing the same thing we've been doing for the last fifteen years." Goldstein tells us. "We think we should explore the videogame medium as you would a good book, a good movie, a good piece of art. That really is [Minority's] vision – and we think if we don't do that, then we're underestimating the industry". This design philosophy is resonant in the gameplay of both *Silent Enemy* and *Papo & Yo*; Minority show a distinct interest in fusing mechanics and narrative together, giving the player a reason for doing what they're doing. "We're spending a lot of time and effort on creating meaningful mechanics that really go together with our story – we'd rather do that than spend all our time on facial animations or something, y'know?"

> "We were told we've made the front section of the New York Times art section, and we were like 'Really? Are we art? Cool!'"
>
> TALI GOLDSTEIN MINORITY MEDIA

Silent Enemy is a game that focuses on nature, and our relationship with it. Based on Cree culture (a First Nation/native culture originating from Minority's locale; Northern Quebec), the title will see your main character possessing animals, using each creature's special skills to overcome environmental problems. But the game, stripped of all metaphor, is about bullying – there are Tim Burton-esque anthropomorphic crows that will stalk you and try to impede your progress, and here's the catch – you can't fight back.

"It's set in a land of permanent Winter," Tali explains. "This land is inhabited only by the Crows; they like it here, it suits them. Nothing changes, everything stays the same. Our hero, the boy, doesn't like this – he's searching for the Spring, where you have hope, where you have flowers, where you have heat." Your main quest is to charge the wintry landscape with the powers of Spring, avoiding the Crows while you're at it.

It all seems to be a subtle message about confronting and dealing with your problems – 'violence is never the answer', it advises. The fluid animations and vibrant colours of Spring are far more rewarding and pleasant on-screen than the harsh wintriness of the frozen north-lands. It teaches you that pacifism is ultimately more worthwhile, that adversity can be overcome. Minority have only made two games, but already they seem to be filling a niche in the industry that's been vacant for too long.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

LEGEND OF RAVEN

Format: PS4, Vita, Xbox One
Publisher: TBA
Developer: Nicalis
ETA: Q4 2014



WITH CHARACTERS designed by *King Of Fighters*' artist Kotani Tomoyuki, Nicalis' fighting game looks like it'll harken back to the pixel-art golden years of the genre. Taking most of its cues from *Street Fighter III: Third Strike*, *Legend Of Raven* will have a heavy focus on parries and counters – damage mitigation is the name of the game here. Technical fighters are few and far between lately; this is a welcome addition to the roster.

DEUS EX UNIVERSE

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Eidos Montreal
ETA: 2014



BILLED AS an "ongoing, expanding and connected game world built across a generation of core games", *Deus Ex Universe* could be the hardcore gamer's answer to usually child-centric mega-franchises. Focusing on a world where transhumanism has ushered in a new type of enhanced vs non-enhanced segregation, *Universe*'s story will be told across multiple platforms – books, graphic novels, apps and other games.

DESTINY

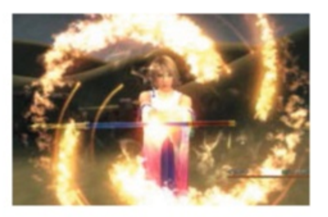
Format: PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360
Publisher: Activision
Developer: Bungie
ETA: 2014



FROM THE maker of *Halo* comes *Destiny* – a persistent shared-world shooter reminiscent of *Borderlands* and *Defiance*. Bungie is keen to prevent the game from being classified as an MMO, since the title features on-the-fly matchmaking, rather than the traditional MMO all-players-on-screen mechanic. *Destiny* is looking amazing, and the beta is expected to go live in Q1 2014. Paul McCartney will be involved with the score, too.

FINAL FANTASY X/X-2 HD

Format: PS3, PS Vita
Publisher: NIS America
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q1 2014



WITH A Japanese release date (26 December) recently announced, we can expect to see a Western release of the PS2 remasters early next year. We got some hands-on time with the game at Eurogamer Expo, and it's amazing just how different the game looks on modern hardware – if you didn't know any better, you could believe that the game was made for the PS3 all along. That awful laughter scene is still in it, though.

YS: MEMORIES OF CELCETA

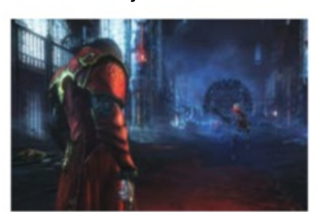
Format: PS Vita
Publisher: NIS America
Developer: Nihon Falcom
ETA: Q1 2014



MEMORIES OF Celceta is a re-envisioning of *Ys IV*, and the first time the title will see an appearance on European shores. The reworking of the title will see the developer alter the story to focus on conspiracy, mystery and back-stabbing and will feature an updated version of the battle system from *Ys Seven*, and the largest playable world in any *Ys* game. We look forward to watching the anime cut-scenes in HD.

CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW 2

Format: Xbox 360, PS3, PC
Publisher: Konami
Developer: Acquire, ZeroDiv
ETA: MercurySteam



THE SEQUEL to 2010's biggest dark horse, *Lords Of Shadow 2* promises to pick up where the last game left off; huge boss fights, frenetic hack-'n'-slash combat, and interesting character design combine to create a title about vampires that might tread new ground. *Lords Of Shadow 2* sees *Castlevania* go open-world in a city built on Dracula's castle. It's an interesting direction that we hope to see pay dividends.

FINAL FANTASY IV: THE AFTER YEARS

Format: iOS, Android
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: In-house
ETA: Winter 2013



THE MOBILE version of the *Final Fantasy IV* remake is based on the recent DS release, but with a pared down engine that's more suitable for mobile devices. Character models and environments have been reused from the DS version, but there will be new locations and characters, all rendered in polygonal 3D. Hopefully this will be a better mobile *Final Fantasy* offering than we've been used to so far.

BLOODBATH

Format: PC
Publisher: UIG Entertainment
Developer: Freedom Factory Studios
ETA: Winter 2013



WHAT WOULD you do if, when the world ended, you were thrown into an arena and made to fight for your life before a crowd of mindless drones? *BloodBath* asks that question, and sets you against enemies that have inventive ways of ending your life in this post-apocalyptic reimagining of *The X-Factor*. There are six fighters to choose from, each with their own abilities and methods of dismemberment.



DELAYED – Watch Dogs (Multi)

Ubisoft's flagship next-gen title has been put back until spring 2014 for fine tuning. While we don't mind the delay, it seems shareholders don't feel the same way – shares in Ubisoft dropped 26 per cent after the announcement.



DELAYED – DriveClub (PS4)

DriveClub has also been pushed back until early 2014. Sony claims that the delay is due to pushing for a true next-gen experience, and that the PS4 will still launch with *Resogun* and *Contrast* as PS+ offerings.

PLANETSIDE 2

Format: **PS4**
Publisher: **SOE**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2013**



MAKING THE jump from PC exclusive to PS4, *Planetside 2* will retain its free-to-play sensibilities, giving gamers that pick up the PS4 the opportunity to play an immersive game on their new console from launch. There is no PC-to-PS4 cross-play, so the opportunity for pad players and mouse-and-keyboard devotees to face off will have to be satisfied elsewhere. Apparently, the game will be the same as the PC version, but with everything set to Ultra.

PAC-MAN AND THE GHOSTLY ADVENTURES

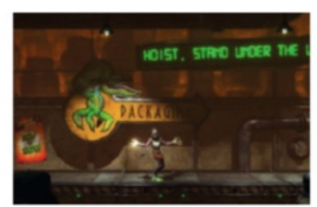
Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Namco Bandai**
Developer: **Idea Factory**
ETA: **Winter 2013**



PAC-MAN IS coming back in a 3D adventure platformer for consoles, and a 2D side-scroller for the 3DS. The games are designed to run simultaneously with a new TV series featuring everyone's favourite yellow pill-muncher and his unfortunately named ghostly antagonists. The games are aimed at a younger audience, with the gameplay being simple and uninspired. It's a shame to see just how far *Pac-Man* has fallen.

ODDWORLD: NEW 'N' TASTY

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Oddworld Inhabitants**
Developer: **Just Add Water**
ETA: **2014**



BUILT IN Unity, *New 'N' Tasty* is a high-definition remake of 1997's *Abe's Oddysee*. The game seems to be a faithful remaster of the original darkly industrial platformer, and the atmosphere promises to be more resonant this time around with its 2.5D level design. Honestly, we were quite surprised when the game was announced – we thought the *Oddworld* IP was dead, but we're very pleased to see that it isn't.

MIGHTY NO. 9

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Comcept**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2014**



ONLY TWO days after its announcement, Keiji Inafune's *Mighty No. 9* smashed its original Kickstarter goal, and has since gone on to blast through each of its proposed stretch goals too, making it the sixth most successful Kickstarter project of all time. The game is a spiritual successor to Inafune's *Mega Man* games – the rights of which remain held by Capcom. Veteran composer Takashi Tateishi will be heading the score, too.

PERSONA 4: THE ULTIMAX ULTRA SUPLEX HOLD

Format: **PS3**
Publisher: **Atlus**
Developer: **Arc System Works**
ETA: **2014**



THE SEQUEL to *Persona 4: Arena* revises the battle systems of the game in response to fan feedback. Among balance changes, most characters have now been given a Shadow Type – a high-risk, high-reward Persona card that allows huge damage but sacrifices defensive capabilities. There are three announced new characters, too, two of whom (Yukari and Junpei) are taken from *Persona 3*.

UNNAMED MONOLITH SOFT PROJECT

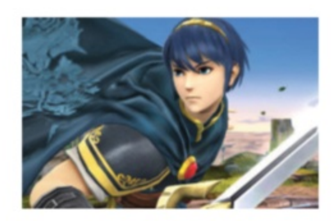
Format: **Wii U**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **Monolith Soft**
ETA: **2014**



TENTATIVELY NAMED 'X' by fans, the developer behind *Xenoblade Chronicles* still has no news regarding its first Wii U offering. The game looks like a mix of *Final Fantasy* and *Gundam*, with lashings of *Vanquish* thrown in. The graphics look stunning, and the gameplay is reminiscent of the *Xenoblade* series, and what we've seen of the game so far shows off mech combat and huge monsters.

SUPER SMASH BROS FOR WII U AND 3DS

Format: **Wii U/3DS**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **In-house/Namco**
ETA: **2014**



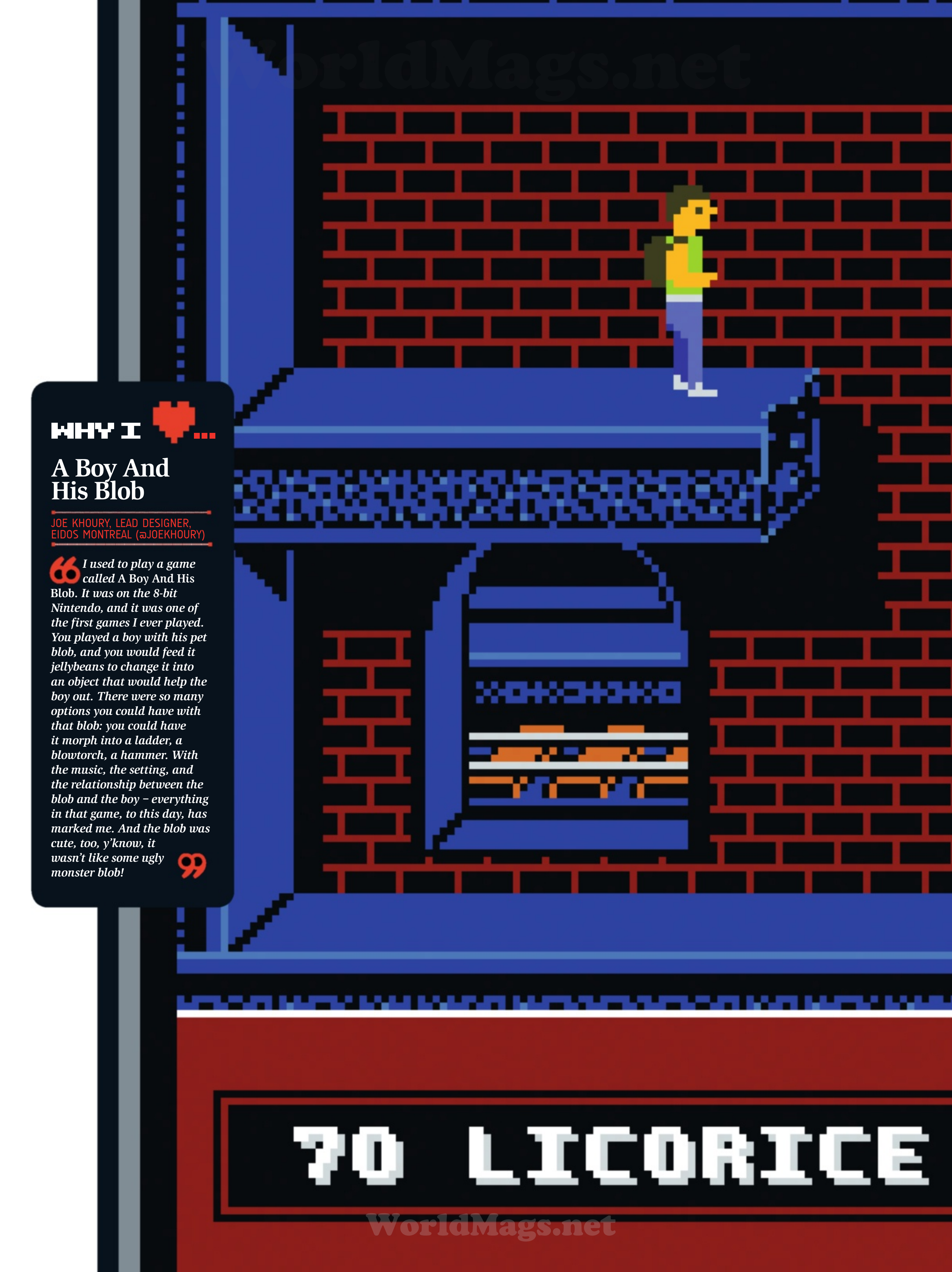
THE ROSTER for *Smash Bros For Wii U and 3DS* has slowly been growing over the last few months. Now in play is Marth from *Fire Emblem* – the full roster is: Pikachu, Mario, Luigi, Kirby, Fox, Samus, Bowser, Pit, Link, Toon Link, Pikmin & Olimar, Peach, Sonic, Bowser, Mega Man and Wii Fit Trainer. Not a bad line-up, but still missing Solid Snake. And not a Solid Snake voiced by Kiefer Sutherland…

THREE MONKEYS

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Incus Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2014**



THREE MONKEYS is a game that features a blind protagonist who's tasked with saving the empire of Byzantia from an unspecified threat. The gameplay is conducted through sound alone, fully reliant on audio to show you the world and what's around you. While there are ambient graphics, they act only as a screensaver. This seems ambitious; we look forward to seeing it mature.



WHY I ♥...

A Boy And His Blob

JOE KHOURY, LEAD DESIGNER, EIDOS MONTREAL (@JOEKHOURY)

"I used to play a game called A Boy And His Blob. *It was on the 8-bit Nintendo, and it was one of the first games I ever played. You played a boy with his pet blob, and you would feed it jellybeans to change it into an object that would help the boy out. There were so many options you could have with that blob: you could have it morph into a ladder, a blowtorch, a hammer. With the music, the setting, and the relationship between the blob and the boy – everything in that game, to this day, has marked me. And the blob was cute, too, y'know, it wasn't like some ugly monster blob!"*



> "Everything in that game, to this day, has marked me"
>
> **JOE KHOURY, EIDOS MONTREAL**

JELLYBEANS



ALONE IN THE DARK

FROM SOFTWARE PROMISES A DARK SOULS SEQUEL EVERY BIT AS TOUGH AS ITS PREDECESSOR. WE SURVIVE TRAP DOORS, BLACK PHANTOMS AND A SKELETON ARMY IN OUR MOST PUNISHING LOOK AT DARK SOULS II YET…

Everything changes. Well, maybe not quite everything. But after concerns that *Dark Souls II* may go soft on players following the replacement of Hidetaka Miyazaki in the director's chair, it's hard not to pore an over-analytical eye across every minute detail of From Software's upcoming sequel. The good news is that the follow-up to the 2011 sleeper hit appears to be, on the surface, more or less indistinguishable from its predecessor, right down to a righteous determination to debase all bull-headed warriors charging into battle. But what hardened *Souls* fans might not expect are the subtle differences to core systems that will have a sizeable impact on the series going forward.

The duo at the helm, Tomohiro Shibuya and Yui Tanimura, clearly have a lot to prove, and after extensive time with the game we're pleased to report that the sequel has lost none of the captivating bite that has defined *Souls* to date. Yet, a lot has already been spoken of some of the major additions that enter the sequel, with perhaps the Life Gems being the most hotly contested among the new features. These pick-ups enable players to slowly refill their health meter when consumed, a time-sensitive alternative to taking a swig from your Estus Flask (the traditional method of replenishing health outside of resting at a bonfire). The design is clearly a tactical one, offering movement over »

“One of the main goals was to carve away a lot of the fat that hindered players from the true essence of the Dark Souls experience”

Yui Tanimura From Software

a quicker health restore, but it's important to note that it's a feature that does little to neuter the base challenge.

In fact, it would be easier to interpret the inclusion as a testament to how Shibuya and Tanimura have understood the clear areas of refinement needed in the sequel. During our time exploring a particularly sizeable woodland expanse known as Huntsman's Copse, Life Gems drop with surprising regularity; however, that's leveraged by the slight adjustment to how death functions in the sequel that more closely resembles *Demon's Souls* than its direct predecessor. Here, every death conceded in Hollow state chips away slightly at the player's health until it's reduced to a crippling 50 per cent (reversed by using a Human Effigy to return to human form).

It's a twist to the formula that drills further fear into the player who's dreading what lies beyond the ominous smoke of the next fog gate. Anxiety appears to be an emotion that *Dark Souls II* wickedly manipulates, as it bumptiously telegraphs its frights and thrills like a hellish rollercoaster ride. A cautious approach to every step is demanded, such is the prevalence of not-dead dead things, booby-trapped loot and unseen foes. We found death just by approaching a simple door – it shattered into splinters as an enemy, slashing wildly at our person, burst forth through its rotten frame.

Not all the tricks that *Dark Souls II* pulls are meant to cajole the player into an unfortunate demise, but they are equally noticeable. The new graphical engine adds untold enhancements to the haunting milieu of the game world; the manner in which the grass sways with the biting breeze, or how your hero's cape ruffles against the wind are just a couple of casual indicators of the increased power underlining the experience. Demonstrating the spectacular lighting and particle effects, one portion of the demo wraps the screen in darkness, forcing the player to make tentative steps through a darkened hollow using a fiery torch (a new mechanic that replaces the player's shield) as its flames illuminate the room and embers spark from its centre. Bolstering the visuals are slicker animations and a significant reduction in the frame rate lag that often hampered larger areas of *Dark Souls*' world – especially those clustered with enemies.

Such is the extensive improvements in this field that it appears to have impacted the fundamentals of combat. Timings have been tweaked, hitboxes have been shrunk and damage has been altered to be representative of distance. It'd be easy to dismiss these changes as insignificant, but the implications on how a player approaches an enemy encounter are huge. Parries have been a core pillar of *Dark Souls*' combat, offering a

■ Above: From Software has taken reassuring measures to ensure that online is more robust in the sequel. Several online betas have gone live over the last month to stress test servers.

■ Right:: *Dark Souls* purists might find that the subtle changes to their character's movements will impact combat performance. The speed of rolling in particular seems to be judged less on equipment load in the sequel.





THE PHANTOM MENACE

ONE ASPECT OF *Dark Souls* that was downplayed compared to its predecessor *Demon's Souls* was the presence of Black Phantoms. Taking the form of previously encountered enemies only with stronger attacks and greater defence, they would often appear at the most inconvenient moment. *Dark Souls II* appears to be bringing them back in a substantial way, as we encountered two Black Phantoms striding along a cliff-top pass during our hands-on time. Given the overwhelming odds of the situation, the best course of action was to run in the opposite direction. But the impression it gave was that *Dark Souls II* will not only build on the foundations of its predecessor, but will further explore ideas introduced in the series' first entry.

Above: Where in *Dark Souls* other players couldn't invade your game if you were hollow, the sequel doesn't have such restrictions, meaning that if you'd rather not enter PvP you're best off unplugging your Ethernet cable.



"We do not distinguish between Western or Eastern audiences; our goal is to create the game and world we desire, to give all players a great experience"

YUI TANIMURA FROM SOFTWARE

Above: Expect plenty of surprises in *Dark Souls II*, as enemies hide around every corner waiting to spring an attack on unsuspecting victims.

5 THINGS TO BEWARE OF IN DARK SOULS II

1 OTHER PLAYERS
We've heard how covenants will see an overhaul in the sequel, which'll have a dramatic effect on how PvP will function in *Dark Souls II*. As well as the constant threat of invasion (even when hollow) watch out for other players summoned during boss battles.

2 BLACK PHANTOMS
Not so much of a big deal in the first *Dark Souls*, these bigger, badder incarnations of previous enemies seem to be a much bigger deal in the sequel. After two of these imposing entities trapped us on a bridge, our advice would be to avoid confronting them entirely.

3 BOSSES
A bit of an obvious one, but from what we've seen of boss design in the sequel it appears that From Software is unrelenting. While only a couple have been revealed to date, both have proven to be challenging and memorable additions to the expanding lore.

4 FAKE DOORS
This one caught us by surprise. While veterans will be used to faux chests that'll happily snap the arm off unsuspecting victims, even the most innocuous of objects don't appear to be safe from enemy ambush. Alas, your shield will rarely be lowered.

5 ADVANCED ENEMY AI
One of the biggest improvements of *Dark Souls* is the advancement of enemy AI. The unpredictable nature of a wider moveset adds a new dynamic layer to combat, while the way enemies adapt to your own play-style will keep players on their toes.

precise and devastating offensive manoeuvre against an aggressive attack – so much so in fact that *Dark Souls*' final boss, Gwyn Lord of Cinder, can be defeated easily with a series of parries – but the whole process has been slowed down in *Dark Souls II*, which casts aside the instantaneous nature and accuracy that existed before and sends players straight back to school.

Attempting a backstabbing attack (which would often result in an instakill previously) has also been made more precarious, with the window being reduced to the point where anything outside of a perfect angle will result in a standard melee attack. On top of that, the camera isn't as forgiving as it once was, with lock-on driven by a player's eye-line rather than auto-switching to the nearest target.

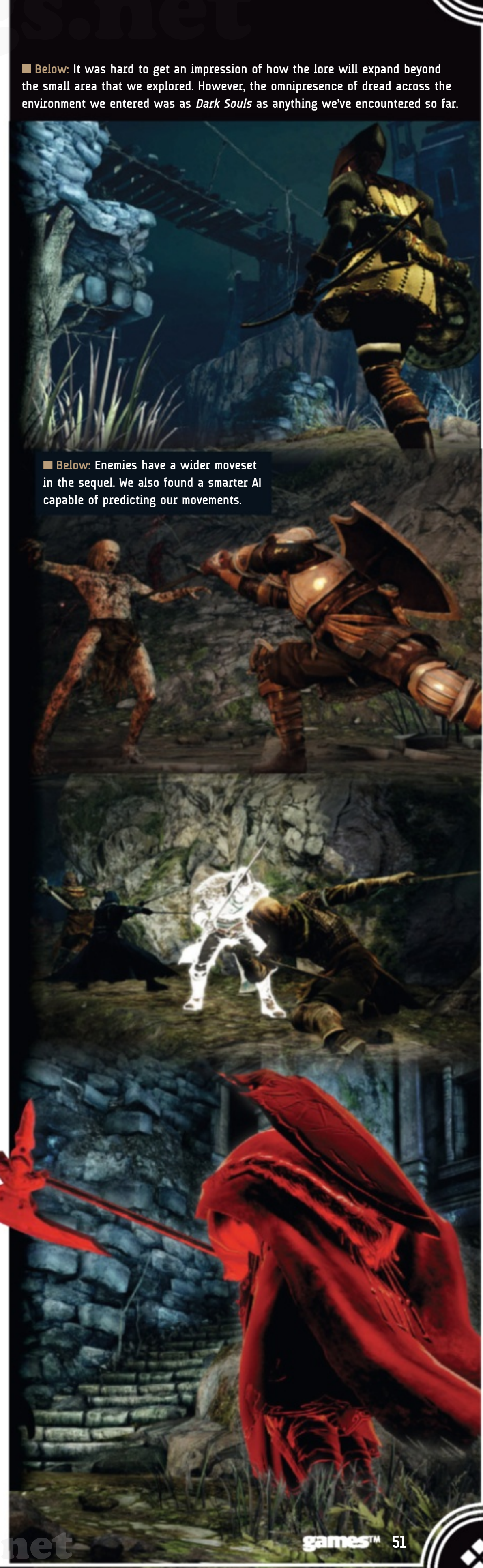
Small changes then, but each hugely important to anyone who spent days mastering the pre-existing systems. These changes aren't so much subtractions made to the template, but rather necessary advancements that enable *Dark Souls* to branch out in other areas of design. It doesn't take more than a few minutes to discover that enemies have seen a likewise overhaul to their combat systems. Movesets are more unique to each enemy type, as well as displaying a huge amount of diversity that has the ability to catch players off-guard even after several visits to the same area. Balancing that out a little are new classes that allow dual wielding which increases the player's suite of attacks, and there have been adjustments to levelling up so that you can pour Souls (the in-game currency) into specific types of magic. The results will likely be a vast range of different player builds, which will no doubt help cultivate online – an area From Software has dedicated a significant portion of its efforts toward.

While what we've played to date has been solely concerned with the PvE side of *Dark Souls II*, it's hard not to imagine what each of these changes means for the multiplayer component of the sequel. It's fair to say that multiplayer was a mixed bag in the last entry, revolving around several covenants that confused players, but those that did manage to either aid or invade other worlds found ruinous lag often trumping skill. Changes to the flow of combat seem to be tailored to make PvP a far more enticing prospect, the slow-down in parrying and the more precise demands of melee combat point towards a greater focus on making a more robust experience that weaves seamlessly into the central single-player narrative.

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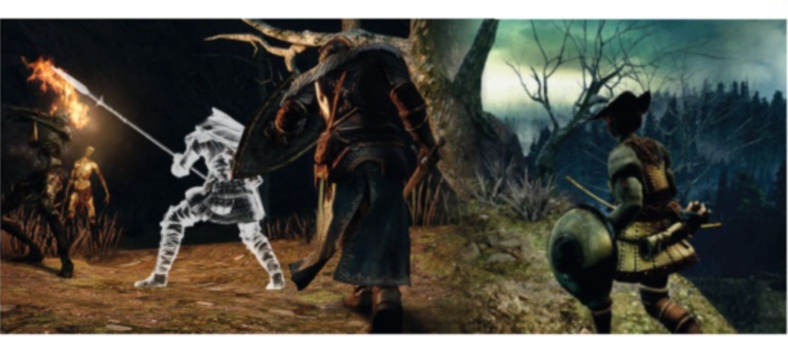
Feeling in a co-operative mood, **games™** is summoned to aid another player during a boss battle located towards the conclusion of the demo arena. Even against three reanimated skeleton lords, a solid defence and a healthy reserve of Life Gems make short work of the enemy. A few sword swipes takes them down easily; however, each one explodes into a shower of smaller skeleton foot soldiers upon death. It's a test of patience as much as will, juggling the constant tide of enemies and picking the right moment to attack before retreating to one of the arena's few safe spots.

Having only had the chance to play *Dark Souls II* for a mere couple of hours, we barely scratched the surface of what the game has to offer, or how deep the new mechanics run. However, the culmination of that time presented itself in a tactical, heart-pounding showdown that resulted in a victory as gratifying as the series' most challenging encounters. We could continue talking at length of the myriad new features *Dark Souls II* presents, from the covenant system through to the streamlined design of the user interface, but while so much has changed what it comes down to is what stays the same. It's that unsurpassed sense of achievement that turned a Japanese curio into one of the most influential franchises on the planet that returns unscathed. It's what leads us to believe that this could be the best *Dark Souls* yet.



■ Below: It was hard to get an impression of how the lore will expand beyond the small area that we explored. However, the omnipresence of dread across the environment we entered was as *Dark Souls* as anything we've encountered so far.

■ Below: Enemies have a wider moveset in the sequel. We also found a smarter AI capable of predicting our movements.





INTERVIEW YUI TANIMURA

FROM SOFTWARE SPEAKS

Dark Souls II co-director Yui Tanimura discusses Dark Souls' critical acclaim, establishing a unique online network and how the sequel will continue to immerse players into a fantasy world unlike any other...



What did you learn from the original *Dark Souls*?
The intention behind many of the design decisions of *Dark Souls* – mainly the sense of accomplishment we wanted players to feel – and how players actually consumed those ideas was slightly different. With the sequel we can reflect on the differences between our intentions and how it was received by players. One of the main development goals for *Dark Souls II* was to streamline the design and carve away a lot of the fat that hindered players from the true essence of the *Dark Souls* experience. These are things like the tedious travelling that became a pain and was getting in the way of experiencing the sense of satisfaction and accomplishment of overcoming the difficulties and challenges in the game.

Did you design the game to try to appeal to both Eastern and Western audiences?
We do not distinguish between Western or Eastern audiences. Our goal is to create the game and world we desire, to give all players a great experience with our best efforts. Also, I think the visual aspects of the game have helped it to become successful in many different places. We aim to reproduce an old school fantasy look; a kind of European wizardry style, and this sort of design seems to be very popular all over the world. That might be one of the reasons Western players become interested in the franchise, but that sort of look is also popular in Japan. *Dark Souls* and *Dark Souls II* are games we purely love to develop, and if this product is accepted by players around the world, this is the biggest source of happiness for our teams. We just think about the players, we don't think about whether they're from Japan or the West or wherever.

And how does the design of 'boss' characters fit into the design? Some of them are incredibly over-the-top aesthetically...
The design of our bosses really depend on how we want the area to play. It depends on a few different things actually, but after we've decided what kind of gameplay we want players to experience, then we decide on what the boss characters will look like, how they will act and what attacks they have. Whatever the case, it's important that they feel right for the area that you find them in.

Why has so much emphasis been placed on the 'loose connection' between players?
There are two pillars that have to be right for every game in this franchise. The first is to give players a sense of accomplishment. The second aspect is the idea that there should be a loose connection with other players, which is what the online elements provide. It is important to be able to share the fun and pain with others, but we feel that direct chatting and direct combat is not the only way that this can presented to players. This is because direct communication applies a lot of stress on players in certain instances.

There are a couple of important things about 'loose connections' in the world. Firstly, players can continue to play at their own pace. Secondly, the connections with other players is limited but the sense of connection is still very much there and that leads to a sense of accomplishment. I believe that this approach has been very much accepted and welcomed, and we would have not been able to get the positive reactions we have got so far for simply just providing a challenging game without those player-to-player relationships.

Is some form of connectivity essential for modern gaming?
This is difficult to answer. I think that, with the network infrastructure becoming better and better, the idea of connecting with players around the world will definitely be a strong part of current games and will most likely become more so in the future. In terms of *Dark Souls*, that loose relationship between different players is one of the main themes of the game. Obviously, you can only experience that if you are connected online with other players. There's really no advantage to playing offline. Well, I suppose, the only advantage is that you will get a sense of loneliness. I guess that might be a genuine advantage...

Do you think *Dark Souls II* will suffer as a result of not being on next-gen consoles?
The reason we are developing on current gen consoles is that we felt that the current gen consoles still had a lot of potential, and was still extremely capable of delivering a more enhanced *Dark Souls* experience. Our goal was to try and deliver *Dark Souls II* as soon as possible, but also to streamline and deliver more directly the pure essence of the *Dark Souls* world. We are confident that we will be able to do so on the current-gen consoles.

If you were to develop a *Dark Souls* game for Xbox One/PS4, are there ways in which you can the hardware allowing you to improve the game in a way not possible on current-gen?
We are still unsure if we will even be able to develop on the next gen consoles, so it is difficult to say and difficult to provide a direct answer. But, a couple of things that may be interesting is not just the exchange of information and data based on ghosts but integrating a system that applies a direct impact on other player worlds based on player actions. Some examples may be things like: bosses who are burnt in flames in one world and appear in flames in a different player's world, the personality of NPCs changing when killed by a player in another world, enemies that lurk across the network like viruses, etc. Again, these are only examples and nothing that has been planned out at this point. Personally, as a creator I'm very interested in the next-generation consoles and I'm willing to create a game for them. But that's just my own personal thoughts on the matter; it doesn't mean *Dark Souls* is coming to them.

Will we see any familiar faces?
The characters and enemies for *Dark Souls II* are completely original and will not carry over from *Dark Souls*. However, experienced players may see some similarities or connections between the two worlds.



Inset: The bonfire remains the only spot where a player can feel truly safe in the world of *Dark Souls*.





"There should be a loose connection with other players, which is what the online elements provide. It is important to be able to share the fun and pain with others"

Yui Tanimura From Software

PLEDGE YOUR ALLEGIANCE

The intricacies of *Dark Souls* have never been particularly straightforward, which is why director duo Tomohiro Shibuya and Yui Tanimura have set out to lift some of the fog surrounding some of the more complex systems returning in the sequel. Covenants are chief among these, which enables players to pledge allegiances to various demonic and divine creatures scattered across the land that feed into your online presence. While the studio hasn't given specific details of how they'll function in the sequel, one example we're given is how the new system will enhance the single-player story. During a boss encounter with the nefarious Mirror Knight, he can summon other players to battle through his magical shield. Unplugging your Ethernet cable may be advisable.

■ Below: Torches are one of the most prominent new mechanics introduced. Replacing your shield (or whatever you may have equipped in your left hand) can leave you defencelessly wandering through an enemy-infested cave. There's a definite risk/reward factor that has to be taken into consideration.



"IF YOU BRING TOGETHER AN INCREDIBLE WRITER THAT HAS A STORY TO TELL AND YOU GET THE RIGHT PEOPLE FOR THE RIGHT ROLES, IT'S LIGHTNING IN A BOTTLE"

PHOTOGRAPHY: **GARETH DUTTON**

THE VOICE OF 2013

GAMES™ SITS DOWN WITH TROY BAKER, THE BUSIEST VOICE ACTOR IN THE INDUSTRY TO REFLECT ON HIS PROCESS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF ACTORS IN BRINGING VIDEOGAMES TO LIFE

We're all broken, wandering souls that are desperately wanting to be in a relationship with each other," Troy Baker tells us as he sits across from us in Warner Bros' London offices on the week *Batman: Arkham Origins* hits shelves. "Games are different from movies because where films are objective viewing, games are an interactive experience. If I'm playing as a character, I want to be in a meaningful relationship with other characters."

Baker has become somewhat of an authority on inter-character relationships in games. Indeed, after taking the lead in *BioShock Infinite* and *The Last Of Us* as Booker DeWitt and Joel respectively, Baker has been at the forefront of games that offer a legitimate in-game relationship with characters you come to empathise with, trust and care about. It was Booker and Joel's interactions with their respective companions that gave those relationships meaning and made them so resonant with so many gamers. "I think it's very indicative about where we are as a games culture that we're crying out for relationships, and we want to explore relationships that, by their very nature, are volatile, are painful at times, are *dangerous* at times."

We asked if this longing for chemistry extended into the recording booth – if what we're hearing through our games' audio is indicative of two people that share a similar, unseen relationship behind the microphone. "I think that 99 per cent of a successful performance is in the casting and bringing people together," Baker explained. "There are situations where it's going to take you a while to find that chemistry with a particular person, and that's because you're dealing with actors; you have egos involved, and insecurities and trust issues and all of that kind of stuff. But when you find the right people for a role, something magical happens. It's evident in games like *The Last of Us*; the relationship between Joel and Ellie, that resonated with me, sometimes painfully so. If you bring together an incredible writer that has a story to tell and you get the right people for the right roles, it's lightning in a bottle."

Baker has been voicing characters in videogames since 2003, working his way from licensed anime tie-ins to the triple-A blockbusters he's featured so heavily in over the past 12 months. In an industry that shifts so wildly from year to year, Baker has been a constant – he's a pleasantly down to earth guy, considering his videogamography spans further than most film and TV actors' credit lists. In our conversations with him, we learned that he's a keen gamer – a genuinely passionate industry veteran, and one who's keen to see where we can push the narrative aspect of the form. "I think that as story and narrative has developed within the game space, that has necessitated the need for actors' performances to rise," he tells us. "We went from platformers – on the Commodore 64 and the Atari 1600, really old-school – we went from pretty decent stories with decently designed gameplay to a situation where story decreased and gameplay increased. And then we saw story increase and gameplay decrease. Since then we've seen a cycle where that reverses constantly. But now we're at the advent of new consoles, games need both. The sky is truly the limit with what we can technically do."

Baker attributes the lengthy development time games are allowed to the feats they achieve. His involvement with *BioShock* lasted two years, and *The Last Of Us* »

» had an extra six months on that. "Those games were in development for up to five years," he tells us. "That amount of time's great if you can get it, but at some point you have to go 'Guys, just put the game out!' But I think the advent of new consoles will be easier to program and develop for, so that means the developers have to really wow their audience. We as gamers want nothing short of spectacle – it has to be bright, shiny, full of explosions, Jesus backflipping over ninjas the entire game, otherwise it's a letdown because our Metacritic score will drop below 85 and we'll be a failure. Gamers are hard to please, and I think that has instilled a new desire within developers to say 'we're going to put all our energy, time and money into doing the best we can do.' And I think because of that, we're going to see the calibre of available games rise. Maybe that means fewer titles coming up, but maybe that's not a bad thing."

It's refreshing to hear this from the mouth of a man inside the industry who has breathed life into so many notable and durable characters – characters that would have otherwise been stale, lifeless mannequins, existing only in polygons and programming, characters that have survived the rapid turnaround of IP and year-after-year release paradigm the industry has become obsessed with. "I feel that storytelling, narrative and performance – all of those elements need elevating to a high level, because with the next-gen, we're going to have a truly great opportunity to tell great stories and we have to find all the right people to form the teams that make the best games we can possibly make. The problem is we're greedy gamers; we always want games in our hands, so developers have to come to a point where they have to cut their losses and move on." Baker explains how *Batman: Arkham Origins* producer Ben Mattis would hold cut meetings – scenarios where he'd gather Warner Bros Montreal staff and cut out entire story points, levels and ideas because they were 'fine', as the studio didn't want 'fine'; they wanted 'perfect'.

Baker's enthusiasm towards engaging with that vision of perfection is part of what allows him to deliver his roles with such vigour and zeal. The process of effectively acting in games requires an awareness and understanding of the form, something Baker fully appreciates. "There are some people – and I don't fault them for this – but there's some people that are like, 'I don't need to know what the output for this game is going to be.' I like to know those things. As a gamer, I want to know what type of game I'm working on is going to be and what platform it's going to be on; is it cross-platform, is it an FPS, is it an RPG, is it open-world, is it linear? I need something that acts as a codex – that acts as a way to understand the character. If you can get me that, I can show you what I and I alone understand about this character."

Baker's roles within games have seen him become more than just a mouthpiece for protagonists and antagonists. Having passed through so many studios and seen the processes of so many different creators, Baker has achieved a deeper understanding of game-making that, really, only someone in his position could see. "All of the questions I ask help me understand what I'm working towards, and that way I get to become more of a collaborative partner, and not only in the story element. When I'm working on a game, I can say to developers as a gamer, you know, 'this is that point where I get pissed off' or 'this is that point where I'm throwing the controller at the screen because it's very, very game-y.' I get the opportunity to say 'is there a way



"I WANT TO KNOW THE TYPE OF GAME I'M WORKING ON… GET ME THAT, AND I CAN SHOW YOU WHAT I UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE CHARACTER"



we can *not* do that?' I seek out opportunities to work with directors and developers that are open to that kind of process."

It seems like working with Warner Bros Montreal offered exactly that kind of opportunity, although Baker told us he was initially cautious about taking on the role of the Joker – which is understandable, considering he was stepping into the shoes of Mark Hamill, Heath Ledger and Jack Nicholson. "They're all incredibly prolific actors, far more proficient and capable than I," he says His humility is reassuring – there's no ego about Baker, just a comfortable sense of satisfaction and appreciation when he talks about his roles. "I had no idea who I was auditioning for at first – all I knew was I had an audition at 10.15am for some character called 'Jack'. I walked in, was handed the materials and I was like 'Oh, that's from *Arkham Asylum*. Oh, that's *Arkham City*. Oh, that's *Killing Joke*… oh my… oh my God. This is the Joker!' I immediately wanted to run. I just wanted to run away because I wasn't sure I could do it."

Baker's turn as the Joker comes after Mark Hamill retired the role after a decade-long run, during which time he amassed a huge following as the clown prince of crime. "There are probably as many people following Hamill for the Joker as there are for his role as Luke Skywalker," contemplates Baker. "I watched him on the animated series and everything; he's *my* Joker, you know? I knew that even if I did take on the role, I could be facing a lynch mob that wanted my head on a silver platter because, y'know, 'How dare you try to usurp Mark Hamill?' I turned to page three in the script, and there was the *Killing Joke* monologue. I just went for it. It was completely self-serving; I didn't care if I didn't get the job; I just wanted to hear this thing spoken out loud. I did it. And there was this silence. It lasts. One of the casting guys says 'Okay, just give us a minute,' and they have this quiet conversation between themselves, and I'm just sat there in this vacuum of silence, self-loathing and judgement of my own self."

"WE AS GAMERS WANT NOTHING SHORT OF SPECTACLE – IT HAS TO BE BRIGHT, SHINY, FULL OF EXPLOSIONS… OTHERWISE IT'S A LETDOWN BECAUSE OUR METACRITIC WILL GO BELOW 85 AND WE'LL BE A FAILURE"

It's clear from how Baker relates his experience how much this role meant to him, and how daunted he was by the opportunity. "When they offered me the role, I said no. Turned it down flat. But the team at Warner Bros told me they didn't want an imitation of other Jokers – they didn't want an impression of Mark Hamill – they didn't want anything replicated. They told me they were doing something different, and it was such a unique opportunity to bring a fresh perspective to such a familiar character. That's what got me, realising I had the freedom to look towards creating a more raw, unformed Joker."

Baker's enthusiasm for his roles is quite plain to see. The most impressive thing about Baker's voice acting is perhaps his range – Booker and Joel sound almost nothing alike, and his Joker is so thoroughly convincing that you'd never believe it could be the same actor. It's undoubtedly increased Baker's profile, and he's got quite a few projects lined up for 2014. "It's incredibly exciting to be given the opportunity look for the little morsels – the weight and the meat behind the lines. As an actor that's incredibly rewarding." If there's a lesson to be learnt from the success story that is Troy Baker, then it's that. "If you're excited about a game," he told us, "and you're excited about the story, and you're excited about the entire project… it just bleeds through into the game experience."



THE BEST AND WORST OF 2013 IN GAMING

2013 WAS A YEAR OF TRANSITION FOR THE GAMES INDUSTRY – THE LAST MIGHTY STAND OF THE CURRENT GEN AND THE BEGINNING OF A NEW AGE. FIRST, WE HIGHLIGHT THE THINGS WE ENJOYED (OR DIDN'T) IN 2013, BEFORE REVEALING OUR TOP TEN GAMES OF THE YEAR...



GAMING MOMENT OF THE YEAR

1 Ellie Survives Winter: The Last Of Us

NAUGHTY DOG'S WORK on *Uncharted* showed that it could create awe-inspiring moments of unexpected drama and excitement. What those skills achieved when applied to the story in *The Last Of Us* was something altogether more dramatically effective – the relationship between Joel and Ellie developed nicely, if somewhat predictably, until the climax of the second act, when Joel is near-fatally injured and Ellie is charged with keeping the two of them alive. This transforms *The Last Of Us* into something much more compelling, a reversal of the dynamic that truly plunges the story into the unknown. You start to see the world differently, reconcile with the fact Ellie isn't as physically tough as Joel and, in shooting deer with a bow and arrow, understand her mindset as a potent survivor despite the escalating odds of the game's end-of-the-world scenario. The introduction, too, of seemingly benevolent fellow survivor David, voiced with real gusto by a brilliantly unrecognisable Nolan North, gives the story an altogether more disturbing ambience that pays off well later on. This is as close as you'll ever be convinced that your main character is going to die. Gamers are unlikely to forget it.

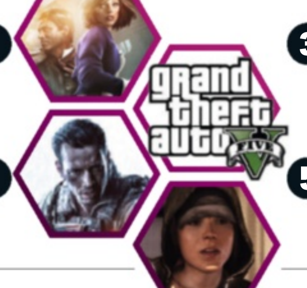
RUNNERS-UP

2 **THAT ENDING** BIOSHOCK INFINITE

3 **ALMOST EVERYTHING** GRAND THEFT AUTO V

4 **THE SHANGHAI TOWER FALLS** BATTLEFIELD 4

5 **JODIE BUSKS FOR CHANGE** BEYOND: TWO SOULS



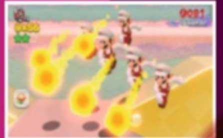


UPSET OF THE YEAR

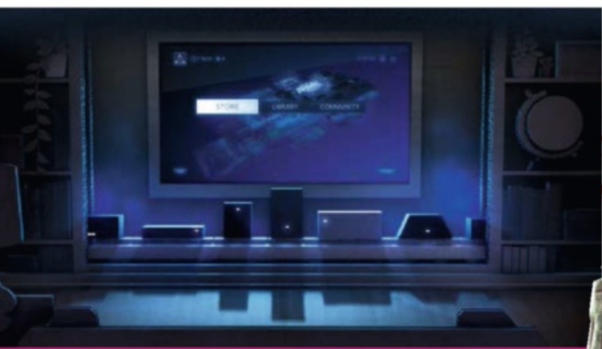
Wii U's Software Beats PS4 and Xbox One

■ DESPITE A WEAK START, as the year rolled on Nintendo began to demonstrate the potential of its new system, with *Pikmin 3*, *The Wonderful 101* and *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker HD* and its prospects looked more encouraging towards the end of the year, with *Super Mario 3D World* and fun diversions such as *Wii Karaoke U* and *Wii Sports Club* standing strong alongside some of the winter season's biggest hitters – *Call Of Duty: Ghosts*, *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, *Lego Marvel Super Heroes*. Meanwhile, with *Watch Dogs* slipping to 2013, the Wii U suddenly and surprisingly seemed pretty strong by comparison – and, title to title, it has the PS4 and Xbox One roundly trashed for exclusives this year.









SURPRISE OF THE YEAR

The Console Market Changes Forever

■ PLAYSTATION 4 AND XBOX ONE? You can keep 'em. 2013 was the year that the alternative console went from an egalitarian pipedream into a fully-fledged reality. The movement was spurred mostly by the continued popularity of crowdfunding, the ambitious blueprints of Ouya and GameStick managed to capture the imagination of a public willing to invest their cash. Likewise, Nvidia Shield debuted in July, offering the depth and high-end graphical fidelity of console software alongside a wealth of popular apps found elsewhere on other Android-based devices. Of course, none of these would be viable if they weren't backed by a healthy catalogue of software, though there's no prospect more enticing than Valve's plans to launch SteamOS on a variety of Linux-based PC rigs that'll jostle for positioning under your TV.

MOST UNDERRATED GEM

DmC: Devil May Cry

■ It was a controversial decision for Capcom to outsource the development of one of its premiere franchises to a Western studio. The *Devil May Cry* series was a rare beast; its kinetic action and punky persona gave it an uncommon international appeal. Ninja Theory's rebranding encapsulated that very same attitude with a contemporary twist that remained true to Dante's alternative, non-conformist worldview, while slickly delivering a rich range and utility to Dante's moveset to take the series' lauded combat system to new heights. *DmC: Devil May Cry* heralded a new beginning, but it was also crafted with love and adulation for what preceded it. Dante may have a new haircut, few fancier moves and a bit of a personality disorder, but all the values that define *Devil May Cry* endure and Ninja Theory's own take is one that deserves your attention.

DISAPPOINTMENT OF THE YEAR

Batman: Arkham Origins

■ WE ALWAYS KNEW it would be an imitation of Rocksteady's games – we were just hoping for a slightly better one. With bad signposting, poorly-judged amendments to the combat system and an absolute lack of surprises when it came to villains, the *Arkham* series felt a bit tired with the still extremely solid third entry. The disappointment here isn't that it's a bad game – it was impossible for *Arkham Origins* to be bad, on such remarkable foundations – it's that this high-quality series has now creatively stagnated for the first time.

BEST DLC

Mass Effect 3: Citadel

■ HERE'S TO YOU, Commander Shepard. That was the vibe of *Mass Effect 3*'s downloadable finale, as players had the opportunity to wave goodbye to the Normandy without the cacophony of entitled gamers drowning them out. This was a love letter to fans of the series, offering one final meeting with the characters they loved until the series enters the next age.



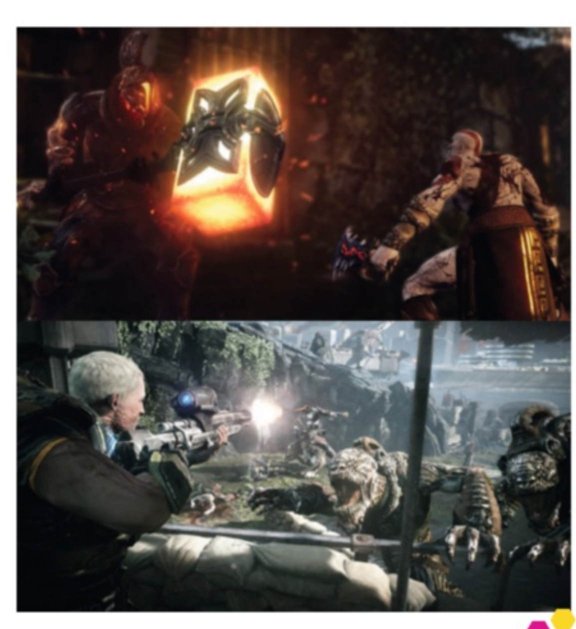
MOST TROUBLED LAUNCH

SimCity

■ FEW GAMES provoked as negative a reaction as *SimCity* this year. Despite its poorly-chosen DRM practices, we were fans of the game itself, awarding it 8/10. But an understandable internet outrage came when the servers for the game didn't work at launch – a videogame faux pas that's impossible to defend – which soured the perception of the series for more than a few fans.

RUNNER-UP: GTA ONLINE





FRANCHISE DEAD END OF THE YEAR

TIE - Gears Of War: Judgment and God Of War: Ascension

■ TWO GAMES THAT perhaps mark the end of their respective series. There's no real problem with the execution of either *Gears* or *God Of War*'s prequels, it's just that the choice of narrative for each gave them an obvious lack of energy – they didn't really further the story of each franchise, and that's perhaps why sales of both were massively down on their high-profile predecessors.



DEFINING QUOTE OF THE YEAR

> "WHILE OTHERS HAVE SHIFTED THEIR MESSAGE AND CHANGED THEIR STORY, WE WERE CONSISTENT IN MAINTAINING POLICIES AND A MODEL THAT IS FAIR AND IN TUNE WITH CONSUMER DESIRES"

■ **Andrew House, president and CEO of SCE, in an obvious dig at the PS4's competition during Sony's gamescom presentation.**



MOST IMPRESSIVE TECHNICAL ACHIEVEMENT

Los Santos running on PS3 and Xbox 360 GTA V

■ THE SCALE, the detail, the amount of stuff you can do – open-world gaming on this generation hit its apex with this remarkable and mythical Rockstar interpretation of Los Angeles.

BEST CONSOLE ANNOUNCEMENT

PlayStation 4

■ IT WAS A strong start to the year for Sony. The first to announce its next-gen hardware, PlayStation 4 was revealed in February – or at least its controller – alongside details of how the console will expand social functionality and enhance the gaming experience. While Microsoft faced controversy with every decision, Sony was golden, garnering praise for its internal architecture, online approach and its price tag. It showed a willingness to evolve on Sony's part, tweaking the design of its DualShock controller, embracing social media and expanding the remit of its PlayStation Plus subscription model. If Sony stumbled anywhere, it was with the launch line-up software and a lack of third-party exclusives – an area it seems Microsoft is willing to heavily invest in.

WORST CONSOLE ANNOUNCEMENT

Xbox One

■ THE ANNOUNCEMENT of Xbox One was something of an omnishambles, after Microsoft rolled out several controversial plans for used games and internet verification policies. The company would spend the later months leading to launch backpedalling and reassessing the console. Changes to how physical media operated were joined by hardware tweaks, though its reputation grew over the course of the year as the games were unveiled. Time will tell whether Microsoft's conformity will hurt its chances against the PS4; while its corporate front seemed to drive decisions, it's hard to deny that much of what was proposed was forward-thinking. Also, Microsoft's investment in games is undeniably impressive, so it could very well be Microsoft that triumphs at the close of the year.

»

TOP 10 GAMES OF 2013

■ FAR FROM THE software drought that many had predicted towards the end of the console generation, 2013 proved to be one of the best, if not creatively rich, years the industry has ever seen. From megabudget blockbusters to pleasing timewasters and indie standouts, here are **games™**'s top 10 games of the year. Remember, these are just the collective personal favourites of one humble magazine's staff – there's always another lighthouse…



10 NI NO KUNI: WRATH OF THE WHITE WITCH

Month: **January** Developer: **Level-5**

■ **games™** HAD BEEN waiting for a good JRPG for some time, one that felt personal in that very PSone *Final Fantasy*-era sort of way. After a few disappointing efforts in the *White Knight Chronicles* series, this year saw the release of *Ni No Kuni*, Level-5's PS3-only collaboration with Studio Ghibli. The visual style and storytelling were the main benefactors of their influence – it helps that a fine job was done with the localisation effort, too. Perhaps it wasn't the most forward-thinking RPG in terms of its mechanics, but *Ni No Kuni* was a damn fine throwback to a bygone era of RPGs, aided by quite extraordinary art direction.



9 TOMB RAIDER

Month: **March** Developer: **Crystal Dynamics**

■ UP UNTIL 2013, *Tomb Raider* was an exercise in franchise fatigue. Not only had the franchise began to coast on past glories but Lara herself became a relic of a bygone era – an overtly sexualised icon rolled out with a new model every couple of years to pique the interest of a new generation of gawky adolescents. Crystal Dynamics' reboot breathed new life into Ms. Croft, retrofitted her with a cutthroat survivalist attitude and crafted a heroine from trauma rather than a snug pair of cut-offs. If anything, *Tomb Raider*'s efforts to contemporise Lara tried to cover too many bases but otherwise this was a thrilling return of gaming royalty.



8 YEAR WALK

Month: **March** Developer: **Simogo**

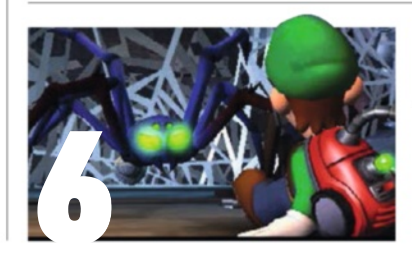
■ IT'S A FIRST-PERSON game unlike any other. Set within a wintry forest, this supernatural oddity asks players to delve into its folklore and discover the grim truth that underpins the game's narrative. From the stark soundtrack to the slender lines of its icy setting, its mood is one of pure unease. As is the case with most apps, there's a strong hook, and here it's the story, told elegantly, while leaving the player's imagination free to roam into even darker places. *Year Walk* entered players into a world uncomfortable to inhabit, but one that you felt compelled to stay inside.



7 DOTA 2

Month: **July** Developer: **Valve**

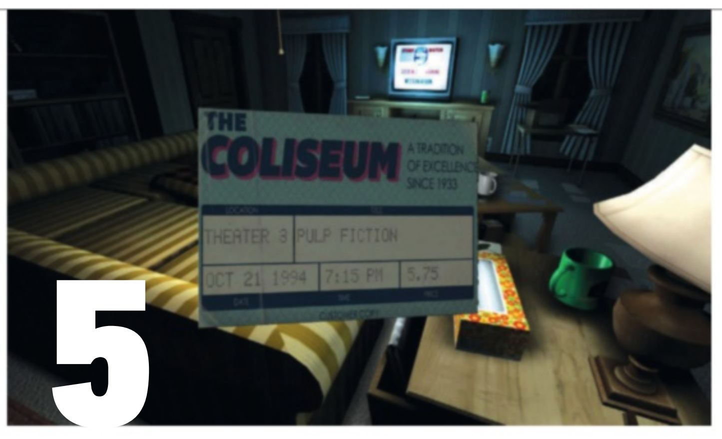
■ MAINTAINING THE SAME deft balancing and skilful mechanics that made *Defense Of The Ancients* strike a chord with gamers nearly a decade ago, Valve's *Dota 2* is the quintessential MOBA experience for gamers. The sheer depth to the gameplay is, in a word, overwhelming. Yet, weave your way through the steep difficulty curve and immerse yourself in the community and *Dota 2* becomes one of the most generous, rewarding and exquisitely competitive titles to ever grace the PC. Valve didn't just outshine its contemporaries in the genre, it truly outdid itself on this one.



6 LUIGI'S MANSION 2: DARK MOON

Month: **March** Developer: **Next Level Games**

■ ONE OF THE 3DS's killer apps, this haunted house adventure proved to be an excellent extension of the original GameCube title's ideas. Making the most of the 3DS' gyroscope and touchscreen capabilities, let's hope we don't have to wait another 11 years for a sequel.



GONE HOME

Month: **August** Developer: **The Fullbright Company**

■ MUCH LIKE *YEAR Walk*, this was another innovative take on the first-person perspective. *Gone Home*'s emphasis is on the art of environmental storytelling, unleashing the player in the lavish Greenbriar estate to gently unwrap the mystery at the crux of the derelict house. The beauty isn't so much the detail that can be gleaned from the various objects and notes left around the empty abode, but the gaps between them left for the player to fill. The results are a hugely engaging, oftentimes disquieting and ultimately liberating journey through a fractured family desperate to connect.





POKÉMON X AND Y

Month: **October** Developer: **Game Freak**

■ THE EVOLUTION THAT many fans had been waiting patiently for years to arrive, *Pokémon X* and *Y* finally brought Pikachu and pals into three dimensions. Yet, it wasn't just the added depth of field that transformed the pocket monster's latest iteration into one of the year's finest, but the richly detailed world brimming with character that embraced the unique functionality of the 3DS hardware to create the most socially engaging, vividly endearing and strategic entry in the series' long and successful history. A warm and nostalgic entry to the series, suitable for both newcomers and existing fans.



THE LAST OF US

Month: **June** Developer: **Naughty Dog**

■ THE MOST HORRIFIC creature that haunts Naughty Dog's post-apocalyptic epic isn't the mushroom-headed plague stumbling through the remnants of humanity, but the hero at the heart of the deeply traumatic survivalist tale. It's a testament to the *Uncharted* developer's exquisite handling of the characters that through each horrific deed and despicable act that Joel and Ellie still manage to feel human. As blockbusters go, it's a hugely ambitious, adrenaline rush of a title, beautifully designed and utterly compelling from start to finish. It's also a strong contender for the most emotionally draining game of all time.



BIOSHOCK INFINITE

Month: **March** Developer: **Irrational Games**

■ NO OTHER GAME sparked so much discussion this year. *BioShock Infinite* can be accused of sticking to closely to the formula of its predecessor, but the ideas presented are no less bold than anything introduced in the first trip to Rapture. The new setting – the floating city of Rapture – was one of both disarming beauty and eerie tranquillity, and when the action kicks off, its inhabitants prove to be every bit as twisted and warped as those trapped in the desolate remains of Rapture. Above all else, the journey of its central characters and the twisting of its complex narrative set the benchmark for videogame storytelling both enthralling and perplexing.



1

GRAND THEFT AUTO V

Month: **September** Developer: **Rockstar**

■ THE MOST ANTICIPATED game of the year somehow managed to surpass expectations, easily earning itself a coveted perfect 10 from **games™**. The dichotomy between the lavish, vapid Vinewood Hills and the dust-swept backwater of Blaine County offered a richly versatile backdrop for depravity, but it was the character drama that kept players rooted firmly in the game's sprawling narrative. Michael, Franklin and Trevor each epitomised the true appeal of the franchise: the wink to classic Hollywood iconography, the rags-to-riches underdog story and, of course, the mad dog temperament that has incensed tabloids for over 15 years. It was, quite simply, perfect blockbuster entertainment and a fitting swansong for the generation.

GAME OVER

THE ART OF COMMUNICATING FAILURE

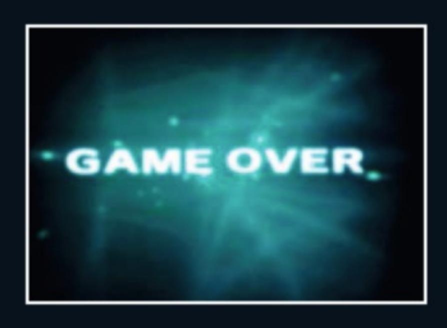
THE GAME OVER SCREEN IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH VIDEOGAMES – THERE'S VALUE IN BEING TOLD YOU'RE NOT VERY GOOD SOMETIMES. WE TRACK THE HISTORY OF THE GAME OVER MESSAGE AND HOW DEVELOPERS HAVE EXPLORED NEW WAYS OF PRESENTING THAT OVER THE YEARS…

If you've played the latest *Tomb Raider* game, you might've noticed the immense amount of detail put into the way Lara Croft dies. Indeed, a YouTube video nearing 2.5 million views, complete with a typically disturbing comment thread, compiles this brutality into a handy ten-minute stretch of well-rendered trauma. If you mess up paragliding through the jungle, Lara is impaled by a stray branch. If Lara fails to wrestle her gun from an enemy, she gets visibly shot through the face. One enemy can put a pickaxe through Lara's heart. It's not like Nathan Drake falling down and becoming a floppy bloodless corpse against a black-and-white screen, never brained, executed or intimately slain – when Lara Croft dies, she dies, and an obvious shock value is elicited from witnessing her demise. Yet it does have a purpose and, for the developers, picking the right Game Over screen for *Tomb Raider* was a crucial part of that game's design.

"Personally, I thought the most shocking scene was if you failed during the river rapids sequence," explains Crystal Dynamics' brand director Rich Briggs, who believes that the context of Lara's origins makes this a tonally correct choice for the reboot. "Lara getting a spike through her neck and head made me cringe every time I saw it."

A Game Over screen is an important part of our relationship with videogames. "Winning tends to end the fun. But failure? It keeps the fun going." So says Jane McGonigal in the New York Times bestseller *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better And How They Can Change The World*. In a chapter titled "Fun Failure and Better Odds of Success" she argues that negative feedback reinforces the player's sense of agency, thus motivating them to try harder and enhancing the sense of triumph when (or rather, if) they emerge victorious. In other words, losing needn't be all doom and gloom – for gamers, it's all part of the ride.

Gaming as a medium offers a plethora of ways in which to convey defeat. In the past, players would be notified of their shortcomings by a well-known (if not always well-loved) phrase: "Game Over." What began as a functional message later became a creative outlet for developers







who granted a host of memorable moments that made us laugh, cry or throw the controller across the room in a blind rage. For many of us those, two little words are still the harbingers of doom.

In an age of checkpoints and autosaves, Game Over screens still serve an important purpose when they're done well – in the best cases, they are iconic components of the overall experience. Sometimes it's as simple as a war quote in the earlier *Call Of Duty* games, though that could be argued as a bit crass in a series known for headshot counters. Other times, it's more complex. A villain from *Batman* with 70+ years of legacy standing over Bats and mocking you in the *Arkham* games; Hideo Kojima is often referenced as a designer who plays with the concept, creating a Game Over screen in *MGS2* where the message 'Fission Mailed' comes up while you can carry on playing in the background, or the message 'Time Paradox' in *MGS3* if you naughtily headshot a young Revolver Ocelot while he's knocked out on the floor.

It's obvious that some developers don't see them as an important part of the DNA in game design, that the feat of dying itself is enough to trigger that feedback loop, but Game Over screens and their many variations are a key part of our gaming heritage. Historically, their development has been a fascinating side story to the advancement of game design itself.

The phrase "Game Over" was first used in electromechanical arcades. Thanks to a patent filed by JC Koel for a miniature bowling alley, we can date it back as far as 1953. As such games were designed to be unmanned they required a prompt to move players away from the machines once their turn had been spent. "Game Over" – a short, concise message that could fit on a pinball lamp – kept the lines moving and enabled the arcade owners to turn a profit.

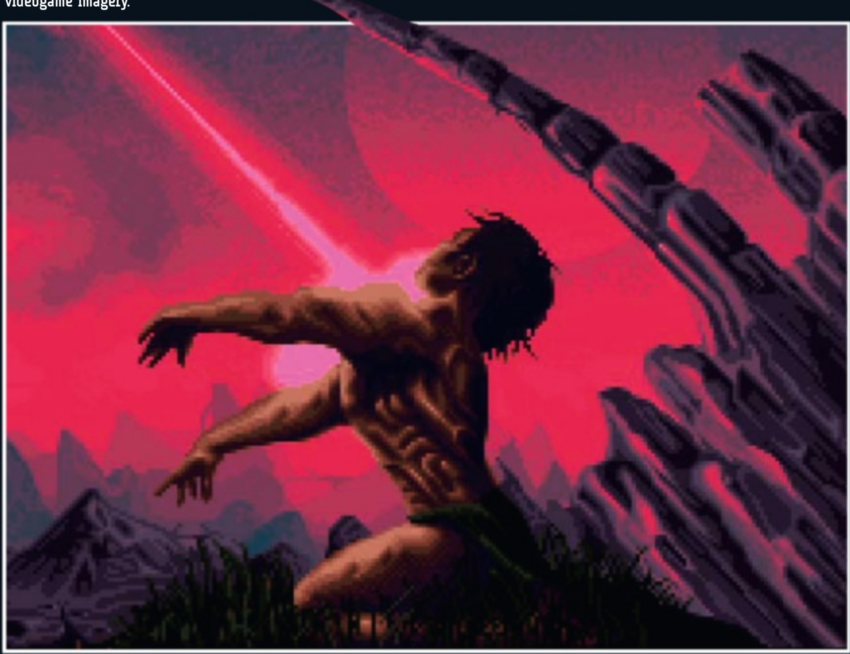
By the mid-Eighties, video arcade machines had taken over and drastically raised the stakes in the minds of gamers. In a possible throwback to carnival games like hoopla and coconut shy, the convention was to give the player three turns. These "tries" or "chances" became known as "lives" – a word that promised intensity beyond your average game of skill. Once you lost them, you were "dead" and consequences were bleak; the aliens continued their invasion, the damsel remained in the clutches of her captor and all the innocent frogs had been reduced to roadkill. The words "Game Over" no longer signalled the end of a turn – they meant death, defeat and failure.

By all rights, Game Over messages should have been rendered pointless in the home market as the coin-op function was redundant. However, in spite of its dwindling relevance, "Game Over" lasted long into the fourth and fifth console generations. As games diversified in style and genre, developers found new ways to add a sense of ceremony to a tragic outcome.

"A lot of my inspiration and favourites came from my ill-spent teenage years in video game arcades," says Rare's Gregg Mayles, who led development on *Banjo-Kazooie* and has worked on many major releases at the studio. "They really knew how to do Game Over screens well, ones that made you want to put more money into the machine (an essential part of arcade design). Personal favourites? Many. The original *Street Fighter*, where victorious opponents mocked your beaten-up fighter. The dramatic image and voice in *Operation Wolf* telling me that I had 'sustained a lethal injury'. And not forgetting the circular saw that cuts you up in *Ninja Gaiden*!"

Some Game Over screens took a light-hearted approach to alleviate the sense of loss, albeit with mixed results in the likes of *Duck Hunt* and *Earthworm Jim*. By contrast, survival-horror presented death as blunt and visceral. Adam Buchanan of RetroCollect.com describes *Resident Evil 2* as a personal favourite, where even the phrase 'Game Over' was "clearly too tame." Instead the game "preferred to pour a mouthful of salt into your zombie inflicted wounds. Not only was 'You Died' splattered in blood across the screen, but you also got to watch Leon Kennedy's body get torn apart due to your lacklustre skills." As games became more cinematic, so did reactions to the hero's death. *Wing* »

■ **Below:** Failure grants an opportunity for some quite striking videogame imagery.



■ **Below:** Sometimes the most obscure imagery is the best.



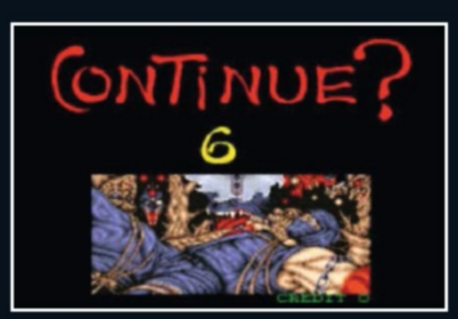
■ Below: From *Final Fantasy VIII*. The feather and gunblade are key parts of the game's iconography.



■ **Below:** Game Over itself as a message is now a classic notion.



"GAME OVER SCREENS SERVE AN IMPORTANT PURPOSE WHEN DONE WELL"



■ **Above:** The sort of thing that haunts you to the very end.

● **Above:** We're now able to be so meta about Game Over screens that a game as broad as *Lego City* can parody them.



■ **Above:** The quite horrible *Donkey Kong Country* Game Over screen, the subject of many nightmares in the Nineties.

» *Commander* depicted an entire military funeral and Snake's contact would scream his name in futility over the codec radio in *Metal Gear Solid*. Poignant and mournful screens suited games that focused on the emotional journey, such as *Final Fantasy VIII*'s black and white image of a broken weapon accompanied by harp music.

Rare has a penchant for unusual Game Over screens – the *Donkey Kong Country* games were highlighted for being unusually traumatising, with the first game showing the monkeys covered in bruises and the music sounding a little macabre. "We wanted players to feel the consequences of failing to retrieve Donkey's banana horde. I wouldn't say the *DKC* games were jolly, they had a certain realism about them at times and there are numerous elements of darkness. The game over scene in *DKC* was inspired by your beaten up character when you lost in *Street Fighter* and I'm sure the prison cell in *DKC2* was based on another arcade game. I did play a lot of arcade games!"

Donkey Kong Country 2's death screen is even more ambiguously scary – we put to Mayles that fans still speculate if the fade to red is somehow a metaphor for Diddy and Dixie being in hell, waiting for execution. Mayles' response amuses. "Ha ha, I love the creativity! Nothing so macabre I'm afraid. The fade to red was simply a way of ending the failure scene. I'm not sure why we picked red though, I guess locked in a dingy cell the logical colour would have been a fade to black."

While many games pioneered new styles of Game Over screens, some titles made theirs entirely unique. The puzzle-based adventure *Shadow Of The Beast II* took an experimental approach to its Game Over screen by using pensive imagery, abstract synth music and a notable absence of any text as if to leave the very concept of death to the interpretation of the player. Tim Wright, composer for *Beast II* and later the *WipEout* games for Psygnosis and Studio Liverpool, remembers the process fondly: "Some of the music I've enjoyed writing the most has been game over themes, even though they've been few and far between." When asked to describe what type of mood he attempted to create or reflect with these themes, he tells **games™**. "Melancholy, wistful thoughts of days gone by… certainly not a sense of overbearing defeat - more a nod towards a passing loss, and a chance to redress the balance."

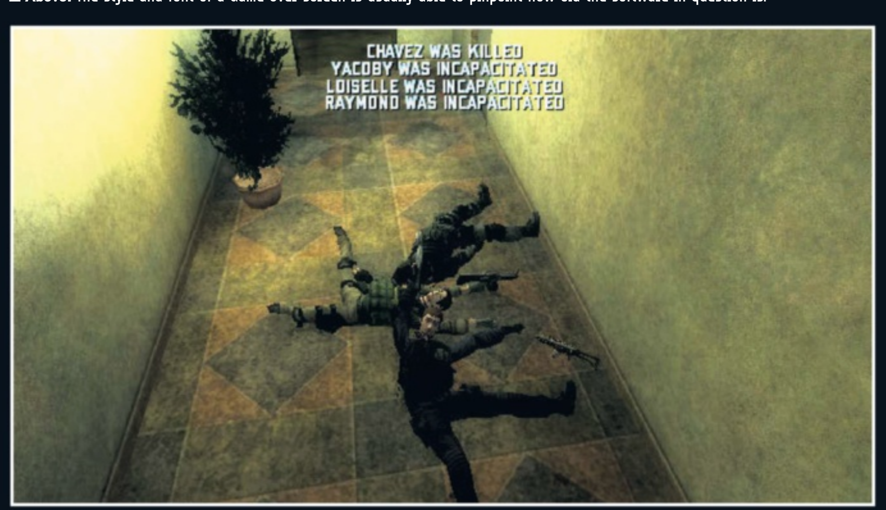
Wright, who also created the music for PSN hit *Gravity Crash*, regrets that this avenue is rarely explored today: "It has to be said, no… I don't get many requests for game over themes. Most developers are happy with falling back to the title screen if someone loses." This appears to be part of an ongoing trend in which traditional Game Over screens are frequently shunned, even in franchises that used them



■ **Above:** Abject brutality might seem a bit desensitising, but it can make for some memorable fail state screens.



■ **Above:** The style and font of a Game Over screen is usually able to pinpoint how old the software in question is.



■ **Above:** Not just in physics, the age of the killcam has taken multiplayer deaths a lot further in terms of visual panache.

in previous instalments. Yet of course, going back to our initial thoughts on Game Over as a concept, this doesn't apply to all developers. Some still see the value in what it can provide the player not just in feedback, but also a more subtle and contemporary design discipline like characterisation. "One of our key goals with *Tomb Raider* was to deliver a compelling and immersive experience," explains Briggs on how Crystal Dynamics tackled the matter. "The manner in which we addressed Lara not succeeding always needed to support this goal."

"In addition to portraying Lara as strong, intelligent, and resourceful, we also wanted to show her evolution from a young woman into a survivor. She was born with the raw skill and the will to succeed, but she's wasn't experienced yet. So it was important that Lara felt vulnerable at times and always human. She was also in a very dangerous situation, and we wanted players to feel the gravity of that situation, and the severity of failing in it."

"IN TOMB RAIDER'S CASE, THE BRUTALITY OF LARA'S DEATHS IS A THEMATIC EXTENSION OF THE GAME"

Yet a Game Over screen can also offer pause for thought. When death is employed for the purposes of learning, a Game Over screen is an important stretch of time for reflection, and for relaying the meaning of death in a videogame. "The way I look at level design is, first I try to concrete the concept of what we want the players to feel, what emotional takeback or feedback the player gets from the experience," *Dark Souls II* co-director Yui Tanimura told us earlier this year. "And with that, we try to design what kind of death they will face, and what kind of challenges and what kind of tactics we want the players to learn from. So we'll have that concept as a base and based on that, we will then discuss how we want people to conquer this or what kind of death we want them to experience and what kind of learning we want them to take back from the challenges in the game." Yet while claims of the Game Over screen's demise have been overstated and reactionary, *Dark Souls* is admittedly in a small percentage of games that really punish players often, and therefore has the player facing that 'You died' message more often than a mainstream game would.

Though these features exist first and foremost in the interest of immersion, this often raises the question of whether games are being made simpler. On this subject, Tim Wright tells **games™**. "Maybe. They're certainly a *lot* easier to play than old school games, that's for sure. Load up any old C64 game and ask a child of today to play it, and they'll be letting fly with expletives in no time at all! Games were smaller back then, so they would eke things out using repetition, or make the challenge that bit more difficult. Computer games from the Eighties were also very unforgiving. There were no 'save game' options, and very few had a pause mode. Unless you had a game freeze cartridge, you would have to play the game from start to finish in one sitting. Given the broad customer base we have in gaming today, you can't set the bar that high anymore. Games have to be accessible to as many people as possible to sell well... and without sales, there are no games."

Pleasingly, then, there's a strong culture of developers that still see the value in failure and have endeavoured to twist the wording of a Game Over screen into something more stylistically appropriate – two such examples are "Love is Over" from *Catherine* and "The Witch Hunts are Over" in *Bayonetta*. Sometimes the message takes on a variety of forms within the same title, such as the aforementioned *Batman: Arkham City*, which even has a variety of dialogue outcomes from each villain presumably to make these seem like more than just a novel addition. Game Over hasn't gone away, then – it's just evolved with the times.

In *Tomb Raider*'s case, the brutality of Lara's deaths are a thematic extension of what that game tries to accomplish with the depiction of its main character – being contentious in the way that's presented was likely the point. "We usually aren't interested in breaking the fourth wall; we want to keep players in our worlds," explains Briggs. "We deliver experiences, and we want players to live that experience as deeply as possible."

As such, Briggs believes moving away from traditional Game Over messages and finding ways to communicate that to the player in a more innovative way should be intrinsic to the industry's creative growth. "I think we can all agree that the industry and the medium have evolved. I consider it similar to how most movies no longer spell out 'The End' on the final screen."


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"NEIGHBORHOOD WEIRD!" SAYS BOY

■ **Above:** We hope this story really makes the news one day.



■ **Above:** One of the most famous and best spins on Game Over.

10 OF THE MOST ICONIC GAME OVER SCREENS



MORTAL KOMBAT 4
N64
■ If defeated in combat, you'd continually plummet down a well onto a jagged pit of spikes.

BATMAN: ARKHAM SERIES
PS3/360/PC
■ Individual taunts were a great way for Rocksteady to characterise its DC villains.

TOMB RAIDER
PS3/360/PC
■ Lara's most recent outing had her savagely murdered in a disturbing but creative plethora of ways.



CATHERINE
PS3/360/PC
■ Vincent Brooks learnt that cheaters are never winners in Atlus' unique puzzler-cum-date-sim.

STREET FIGHTER II
SNES/SEGA GENESIS
■ Seeing your character's blooded, puffy-faced avatar after a defeat just added insult to injury.

METAL GEAR SOLID
PSONE
■ Snake? SNAAAAAAAKE!?

RESIDENT EVIL 2
N64/PSONE
■ The seminal 'You Died' still influences Game Over screens today.

TOTAL DISTORTION
PC
■ The oddest screen here, a demon would taunt you endlessly with a catchy Eighties synth-rock jam.

FRIDAY THE 13TH
NES
■ This uplifting message was an effective method of making you go back and do it *right*.

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 3
SEGA GENESIS
■ Sonic's impatient foot tapping indicated he just wanted to keep running, even in death.

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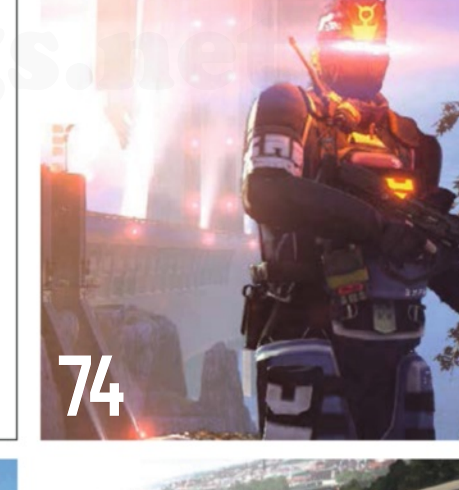
Reviews





THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.













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KILLZONE: SHADOW FALL IS THE BEST-LOOKING CONSOLE GAME WE'VE EVER PLAYED

WHERE'S MULTIPLAYER?

Due to the conditions of this particular review, we were unable to test multiplayer before the magazine went to print. Understanding that the online side of *Killzone* is one of its biggest draws, it'd be foolish not to acknowledge the strides that *Shadow Fall* makes in that regard. It replaces the XP system with challenges, employs a faster frame-rate than the single-player campaign and enables players to customise warzones. The latter is a particular boon, allowing map rotation, weapons and equipment, alongside other features like bots, lives and objectives to be tweaked. Multiplayer has always been one of the strongest aspects of each *Killzone* release and it'll be interesting to see how *Shadow Fall* will utilise the power of PlayStation 4 online. Check back next issue for a more in-depth analysis.







WELCOME TO BIG SCHOOL

Killzone: Shadow Fall

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
ORIGIN: Netherlands
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Guerrilla Games
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (1-24 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

Left: The lighting effects are particularly spectacular. Fans of lens flare will be well catered for here.

Below: By far the most spectacular use of next-gen hardware yet, *Killzone: Shadow Fall*'s visuals continue to impress throughout the entirety of the campaign. If you want to give you PlayStation 4 a workout, then this is the game for you.

Look carefully and you'll find a very telling reference tucked away in the first few moments of *Killzone: Shadow Fall*'s bombastic campaign. Standing out among the various toys and stationary cluttering a young child's bedroom is a poster for a fictional game, *Dark Trolls*. Echoing the familiar font and design of From Software's notoriously challenging *Souls* franchise, you could just take this allusion at surface value – an obvious nod to one of the most celebrated games of the past few years – but the truth is that it's more of a statement of intent.

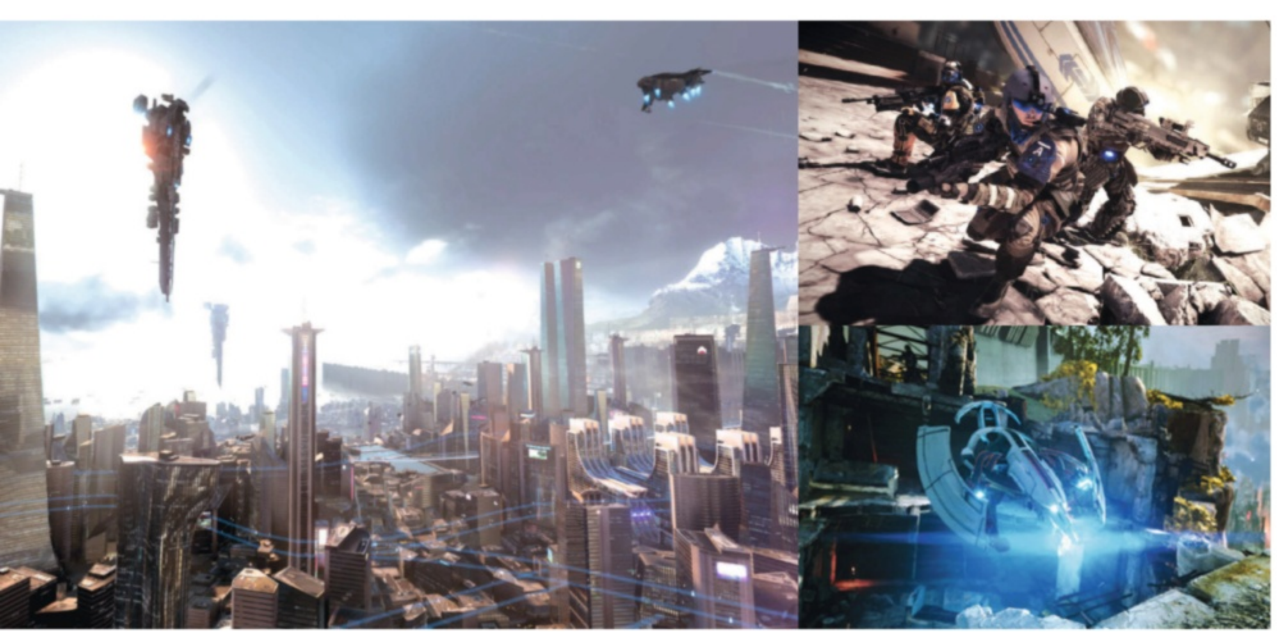
That's not to suggest a substantial increase in difficulty or that *Killzone* has taken a tonal shift by introducing a collection of increasingly monstrous creatures to battle against (that is quite wisely left for *Killzone*'s Sony stable-mate *Resistance*), but rather the much wider breadth of influence that *Killzone: Shadow Fall* incorporates. If *Killzone 3* appeared to trace along the edges of every *Call Of Duty* campaign post-*Modern Warfare*, then the series' PlayStation 4 debut resembles a gallery of best bits from popular franchises, rather than just a plain old shooting gallery. An early chapter wherein you nervously explore the derelict remains of a space station is haunted as much by the ghost of *Dead Space* as it is any real supernatural nuisance, while the human side of Vekta has taken a few architectural tips from *Mass Effect*'s Citadel. What's most surprising is the positive impact that this has on *Killzone*'s identity. Rather than depreciate what little personality series has struggled to establish, it has the exact opposite effect; each location feels part of a much larger, tangible and deeper fictional universe than the small glimpse we're given through the duration of the main campaign.

The lack of brown certainly helps. We have to applaud Guerrilla Games for showing some restraint in that regard, so fond in the past of bathing the screen in all kinds of murky hues that we're surprised *Shadow Fall*'s vibrant palette doesn't outright blind its Helghast troops. When the game does eventually

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

PRETTY THINGS: The *Killzone* franchise has always been a powerhouse graphically for whichever Sony platform it's released on and *Shadow Fall* feels like a true visual leap and a sign of the potential of the PS4.





Left: Hardly the most charismatic AI partner in the history of videogames, but up there with the most useful.

A return to some of the series' familiar environs in the last few hours it's almost as if the developer has lost its early inspired vim and resorted back to what it knows best.

But even when *Shadow Fall* drags its players once again through the dirt and grime of Helghan or another dimly lit steel-lined corridor, the visuals consistently crackle to an impeccable standard. Visually speaking, Guerrilla Games has wielded the power of the PlayStation 4 to magnificent effect. *Killzone: Shadow Fall* is the best-looking console game we've ever played. And don't mistake the truth for hyperbole. The level of detail and polish sets the precedent for the next-gen, the criterion for what is possible is astounding – and, given the enormous leap in graphical fidelity we've witnessed at the end of the current generation compared to where it started, this is a mere suggestion of what can be accomplished on the platform. Guerrilla is so proud of what it has achieved that the first hour of the game is almost wholly dedicated to showcasing how pretty everything looks.

Primary characters peer right down the lens of the camera, displaying a high level of nuance and detail in both animation and texturing to a point that we're willing to forgive the developer's self-congratulatory overindulgence in what is essentially a superficial parade. The excess continues as we get our first glimpse of Vektan – the central location of the game that houses both humans and Helghast residing in contrast on either side of a monolithic divide – the human side a feast of spectacle, every square inch boasting burnished skyscrapers, bustling districts and every sort of lighting effect under the virtual sun – there's so much lens flare that you'd be mistaken for thinking JJ Abrams had been moonlighting at Guerrilla.

It loses some punch towards the end of the game, particularly in facial animation as one major character's stone-faced mannerisms belie the actor's vocal performance. However, given the general sci-fi bunkum that constitutes the story, such technical hiccups do little to diminish the grandstanding leap in graphical fidelity.

It should be said that the story is an improvement over *Killzone 3*. It drops the macho shtick, finding a more balanced tone that sits somewhere between *Tom Clancy*-esque political thriller and a more melancholy war tale. Well, that's the underlining pitch anyway; tucked away beneath an oddly convoluted and fractured narrative that deploys your hero Lucas into various covert operations. The story beats flit between the laughably cliché and insufferably dull. It's inoffensive nonsense and admirably performed with real gusto by its cast, refraining from having any meaningful impact on the enjoyment of the gameplay.

And you can't really fault *Killzone: Shadow Fall* in that regard. Guerrilla has once again crafted an immensely impressive, hefty first-person shooter on base level and even goes so far to enhance strategy and immersion, while dialling back on the histrionic set pieces that marred its PlayStation 3 predecessor. The player is almost always accompanied by an AI combat drone known as OWL, who has several functions that can be used during battle (utilising the PlayStation 4's touchpad as a weapon radial to switch between four of the modes). An early mission involves skulking around an open forest expanse, which takes full advantage of the drone's functionality: using its zipline mechanic to jolt between treetop platforms, advancing on enemies using its attack function, stunning others as

FAQs

Q. IS IT WORTH BUYING A PLAYSTATION 4 FOR?
No it isn't. While certainly it's a massive leap for console visuals, the same can't be said for gameplay.

Q. IS IT THE BEST KILLZONE?
In our opinion, yes it is. It's sorted out a lot of the clunky elements of *Killzone 3* and returned more towards what made *Killzone 2* so great.

Q. DOES IT TURN OUT THAT THE ISA ARE THE REAL VILLAINS?
Didn't you ask us this last time? Who are you anyway? Well, yes it does. But if you didn't see that coming then you're an idiot.



Right: OWL is unquestionably the strongest of the new features that *Shadow Fall* introduces to the series. Towards the end of the campaign it becomes a pivotal defensive tool in fending off the waves of oncoming enemies.



Above: What we've played of multiplayer is certainly impressive, but look in the next issue of **games™** for a more in-depth evaluation of how *Shadow Fall* takes online multiplayer into the next generation.



Right: There's a healthy amount of dynamism to the environments, so expect levels to change dramatically during missions.

Below: While the narrative wrestles with the question of who the true enemy of *Killzone*'s overarching story is, it doesn't make much difference when you're exterminating endless waves of grunts rushing towards the screen. If it has orange eyes, it's your cue to pull the trigger.

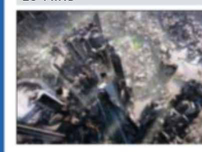


LATER LEVELS REGRESS INTO INCREASINGLY LINEAR AFFAIRS, PUNCTUATED BY SLOPPILY IMPLEMENTED SET PIECES

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

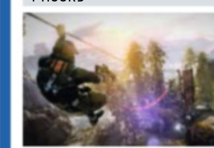
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

20 MINS



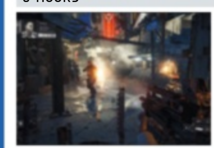
By now your retinas will have been suitably massaged by all the glorious graphics and the game is ready to begin proper. That is, after another five minutes of graphics porn.

4 HOURS



You've got to love OWL. By now you should've used it to full effect: ziplining, hacking and blasting everything – or using it to attack enemies, while you cower behind a rock sobbing.

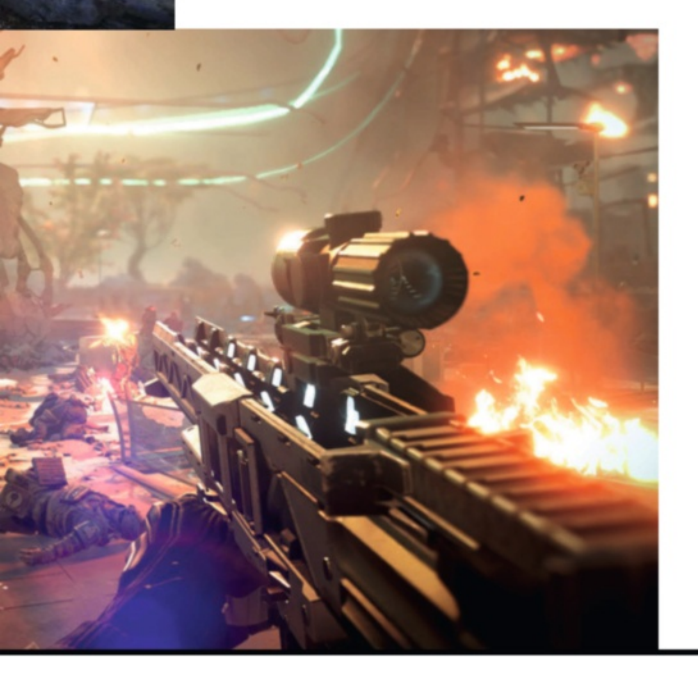
8 HOURS



Around now you should be nearing the conclusion and everything has taken a turn for the brown. Still, even at its murkiest, *Shadow Fall* is a beautiful game.

LETTERS FROM THE DEAD

Jumping on the bandwagon of just about every major action franchise at the moment, *Killzone: Shadow Fall* sprinkles an abundance of collectable items across its campaign for players to discover. These come in the form of newspapers (that highlight notable events from the world), comic books and audio logs that offer a glimpse into the personal lives of those affected by the war. It's an interesting idea and one that adds some background colour, but the writing or the world isn't nearly interesting enough to sustain the idea or compel the majority of players into seeking them out. Its use of the DualShock 4 might also annoy some, as there is no way to switch off the audio logs playing through the controller's speaker.



a tactical diversion and hacking computer terminals to disable alarms. Successfully juggling OWL's functionality leads to some of the slickest and gratifying action sequences we've played in a shooter and it's a testament to the open nature of the early environments that gives this fresh mechanic room to flourish in the hands of intrepid players. It's a shame then that it feels under utilised as the game progresses.

While it's understandable that some missions are designed with a particular flavour in mind (such as the aforementioned space station that feels like it was cut straight out of a survival horror title), larger environments lack the craftsmanship to facilitate a wilful exploration and ownership over how objectives are reached or completed. It toys with the idea on a few occasions, boiling it down in one instance to a simple scalpel or sledgehammer approach to a hostage situation. Yet, the former furtive approach rarely feels viable, or at the very least lacks a perceptible advantage to be worthwhile, making the notion of just slaughtering your way through waves of enemies the preferable option.

There's also a pervading sense that Guerrilla has played its hand too early. Later levels regress into increasingly linear affairs, punctuated by sloppily implemented set pieces – one chapter opens with what should be an exhilarating freefall through a crumbling metropolis, only for its to be hamstrung by some painfully awkward controls and basic luck. When it's at its best, *Killzone: Shadow Fall* has the polish, technical excellence and finesse to elevate the franchise among the ranks of the genre's finest, but too often it slips into rote territory, and superficial design (you can slaughter innocent civilians without surrounding NPCs batting so much as an eyelid), not to mention the truly bizarre technical anomalies (we're fairly certain that our hero's height fluctuated quite wildly during the campaign). If Guerrilla had reined in its ambition and concentrated on what it does best – intense and satisfying shooting, fiercely intelligent AI and some of the medium's punchiest visuals – then this could have easily been a formidable launch title for the PlayStation 4.

It all comes back to that poster hanging on the bedroom wall. *Killzone: Shadow Fall* is so full of influences, struggling to balance so many different ideas across the eight or so hours of single-player that it fails to settle cohesively. Even worse, nothing here feels particularly new. *Killzone: Shadow Fall* is an immensely enjoyable shooter but one busy distracting itself from being anything more.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

AN OWL: Your flying AI companion is a reliable aid, healing, hacking and hurting as directed.
RAPID RADIAL: The DualShock 4 is used in conjunction with OWL, with the touchpad utilised as an effective second D-pad of sorts. More of this.

VERDICT 7/10
A VISUALLY STUNNING RIDE LACKING IN FOCUS

COMPARED TO THE HIGH-FIDELITY BEAUTY OF KILLZONE, THERE IS LITTLE IN KNACK THAT COULDN'T BE RECREATED ON PS3

GADGETS AND GIZMOS

Knack can find hidden chests containing parts to create gadgets, with effects such as increasing damage if you don't take a hit, or notifying when there are further hidden items. The problem is, each gadget has several parts, and the odds of finding every single one are low – we finished the game without having created a single complete device. Each part found is for a specific gadget, so you cannot simply choose which to make first – it's luck of the draw whether the ones you find are the ones you need. Of course, using a walkthrough will solve this problem, but it's still an unfortunate bit of design that doesn't really work.





Right: *Knack* feels stuck halfway between action and platformer: neither side is quite fleshed out enough to make it feel like a complete and well-rounded game.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

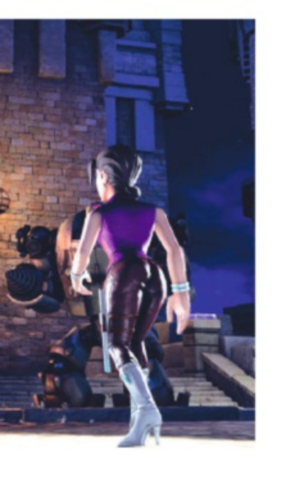
A SURPRISINGLY OLDSCHOOL START TO NEXT GEN

Knack

***Knack* as a concept seems to have come from a past era: an age of cuddly platformer mascots, selling millions and representing their console.** The industry has moved on, and Sony's choice to use *Knack* as the first ever PS4 game shown to the public seems a brave one. Written and directed by Mark Cerny, *Knack* has a considerable platforming heritage behind it – this is a man who has worked on *Sonic The Hedgehog*, *Crash Bandicoot* and *Spyro*, to name a few. At times it's easy to see the old school influences in *Knack*, but as a whole it fails to bring the genre forward into a new generation.

Knack is a being created from the tiny ancient relics that power human society, given a form and sentience after years of research. Being entirely composed of these small stones, Knack can absorb relics to increase in size and power. It's an interesting concept for a character with a lot of potential that is unfortunately never capitalised on. An initial training stage teaches you everything you need to know, which doesn't take long. This is a simple game: Knack can jump, punch, use a special attack by collecting items to power it, and dodge in any direction with a flick of the right stick. It's a simple control scheme which changes little over the course of the game, and strangely makes no use of the new features on the Dual Shock 4.

Above: Knack's voice is amusingly deep and soulful, even when he shrinks down to tiny sizes..



Left: One of the main villains is a genius industrialist who bears an uncanny resemblance to Tony Stark.

For a game with such a child-friendly look, *Knack* is surprisingly difficult. Regardless of how big or little he is, Knack is never more than a couple of hits from death, resulting in every enemy being a big threat if players get careless. In a way it's similar to *Dark Souls*, with every encounter requiring the player's full attention. Knowing when to dodge is essential, and most foes have a particular animation before big attacks that gives you a chance to get out of the way. Checkpointing is also quite rare, with death often resulting in having to replay a considerable section of the stage. Working through a couple of rooms before repeatedly dying on a third quickly gets irritating, especially given the rather cheap nature in which the game can kill you. It's not uncommon to be randomly killed by an off-screen attack or a stray projectile.



Above: Decent voice acting and animations save the story from being completely unremarkable, but on the whole this is a forgettable tale. The childish, simple tone conflicts with the old school, difficult gameplay to create a whole that doesn't quite work.

Getting the hang of combat and taking down big enemies is fun to begin with, but a lack of variety leads it to quickly grow dull. The gameplay evolves little as the story progresses. The things you are doing in the first 30 minutes of *Knack* are the same things you'll be doing in the last stage – jumping, dodging and punching. Aside from the graphics, *Knack* could be a PS2 game. There is nothing here mechanically that wasn't possible before. In some ways, with its emphasis on combat and a fixed camera that often views the action from above, *Knack* sometimes feels like a simplified *God Of War*.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

LEVEL UP: The boring, samey level design is the biggest issue in *Knack*. With more variation in environments, objectives and enemies, it would be a far more interesting game.

Level design is also repetitive and dull. Every stage follows the same pattern, throwing the player into an arena-like area full of enemies. Defeat them and the exit opens, leading to the next arena, and so on. The scenery may change, but the repetitive design and some uninspiring and sparse environments lead to stages that feel far too similar. Occasional changes in pace, such as Knack absorbing wood or ice, or turning invisible to bypass laser beams, are never capitalised on and don't do enough to change the gameplay.

Knack may grow and shrink as he gains and loses parts, but this isn't an organic, unscripted process. The player is always the size the game wants them to be, the extreme linearity of the levels making sure you never get too big too quickly. Even when you become huge, the enemies you are fighting grow to match you, making it feel as if nothing has changed. Knack feels a bit heavier as he grows but otherwise, the controls are exactly the same. The result is, despite being enormous, you never really feel as such.

Other than a next-generation layer of shine on everything, *Knack* isn't particularly good-looking. Compared to the high-fidelity beauty of Killzone, there is little in *Knack* that couldn't feasibly be recreated on PS3. The game even suffers slowdown on occasion when dealing with the many tiny parts of Knack flying about, showcasing the impressive but entirely superfluous particle effects at work.

The story is childish and simplistic, although whether that is a criticism depends entirely on who you consider the intended audience to be. This is a cartoon world of good and evil, simple characters and obvious plot twists combining to tell a merely perfunctory plot; it's the one part of the game that feels solely aimed at children. With little replay value beyond unlocking harder difficulties and battling through a basic arena mode, it's hard to recommend *Knack* as a must-have for those picking up a PS4. The times have changed, but *Knack* has unfortunately not moved with them. It's fun at times, with satisfying, simple combat, but there just isn't enough here to reach that next level of quality. As an example of the next generation it fails, and for a launch game that's a crucial error. It's worth a try when it inevitably comes up for free on Playstation Plus, but until then *Knack* is nothing more than forgettable.

BETTER THAN

SONIC UNLEASHED



WORSE THAN

CRASH BANDICOOT

FAQs

Q. ANY MULTIPLAYER?
A co-op mode allows two Knacks to play at once, but otherwise this is a single-player affair.

Q. HOW IS THE TOUCHPAD USED?
Not at all, an odd design choice considering *Knack*'s first-party, exclusive status.

Q. HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE?
A playthrough on normal should take around ten to twelve hours.

VERDICT 5/10
NOT THE MECHANICAL JUGGERNAUT SONY WAS AIMING FOR



DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Capcom
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

UNDEAD NIGHTMARE

Dead Rising 3

There's a poster for the first season of *The Walking Dead* – the TV show, that is – that feels like the founding artistic guideline for *Dead Rising 3*. It depicts protagonist Rick Grimes alone in the desolate outskirts of Atlanta, where rows upon rows of cars have been abandoned in the wake of the recent zombie apocalypse. That's the utterly serious end of zombie fiction, almost to a fault, and Capcom Vancouver intriguingly chose to marry this straight-faced approach to *Dead Rising*'s existing penchant for total silliness. Tonally, the ridiculous and the dramatic exist along side each other. This creative decision is one of the primary reasons this Xbox One exclusive is the best entry in the series, along with a large and detailed open world that demonstrates the potential of this new generation.

Following a similar structure to the other *Dead Rising* games, time is counting down in this third entry as the government plans on Raccoon City-ing the fictional locale of Los Perdidos in seven days (fair enough that Capcom is recycling a premise it created, we suppose). Your character, Nick Ramos, has to find a way out before the bomb drops, aiding other survivors along the way.

The big difference in *Dead Rising 3* is the size of the open environment and the inclusion of vehicles. Los Perdidos isn't exactly massive, but it's big enough to make driving a comfortable and valid inclusion, with highways and city streets to speed around. It feels about as big as an island in the earlier *GTA* games, and for the purposes of what *Dead Rising 3* aims to accomplish, Los Perdidos certainly feels adequately sized. The key element in exploring this open world is uncovering details as opposed to cruising over masses of land. If, ever since *GTA III* arrived in 2001, you've been dreaming of an open world game where you can enter every building and have them be different, *Dead Rising 3* is as close to that as you'll ever get.

Herein lies the most impressive thing about the game. Locations feel hand-crafted, extraordinarily detailed and anything but arbitrary. There's a subway system in Los Perdidos, an art gallery, a laundrette, a posh hotel where the ambience completely changes and a theatre where zombies are crowding the tables. The details are impressively realised, resulting in an experience where covering the streets only encompasses one half of what the environment has to offer.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

LAND OF THE DEAD: *Dead Rising 3* is a good fit for an open world, and while Los Perdidos isn't huge, it's the right size for this type of game.

It's an open world quite unlike anything else, filled with secrets – combining weapons returns to *Dead Rising 3*, allowing Nick to fuse everyday objects, after finding or unlocking the appropriate blueprints, and creating something unique and deadly in its place. These elements are balanced well against the world's geography. If you're out in zombie-infested streets with the intention of faffing about, you'll find yourself drawn into discovering new blueprints or collectables anyway. It's deft open world design that organically draws you into further playing. You see a sword stuck in the ground in somebody's back garden and can't help picking it up, or see an undead-harrassed survivor asking for help, *Red Dead Redemption: Undead Nightmare* style, or even a bull mascot outfit outside a store that you just can't help but have Nick try on. It is,

IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR THE THING THAT MAKES DEAD RISING 3 'NEXT-GEN', IT'S SEEING ALL OF THESE ELEMENTS TOGETHER AT ONCE



Above: Seeing the swarms of highly-detailed undead is a technical highlight of this Xbox One title. Imagine what the crowd population will be like by the end of this generation.

Left: Human enemies will interact with the zombies and take them out, too, meaning you can play them off against each other in order to yield a tactical advantage.

BETTER THAN

DEAD RISING 2





WORSE THAN

RESIDENT EVIL 4

URBAN OUTFITTERS

There are plenty of different outfits to find in Los Perdidos, and the sillier you go the better. Cutscenes play out with Nick dressed exactly the way you kitted him out, so naturally you get funnier results if you're shirtless while wearing a giant bull's head. You can keep Nick looking like a real action hero if you want to – but you'd be missing out.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

5 MINS

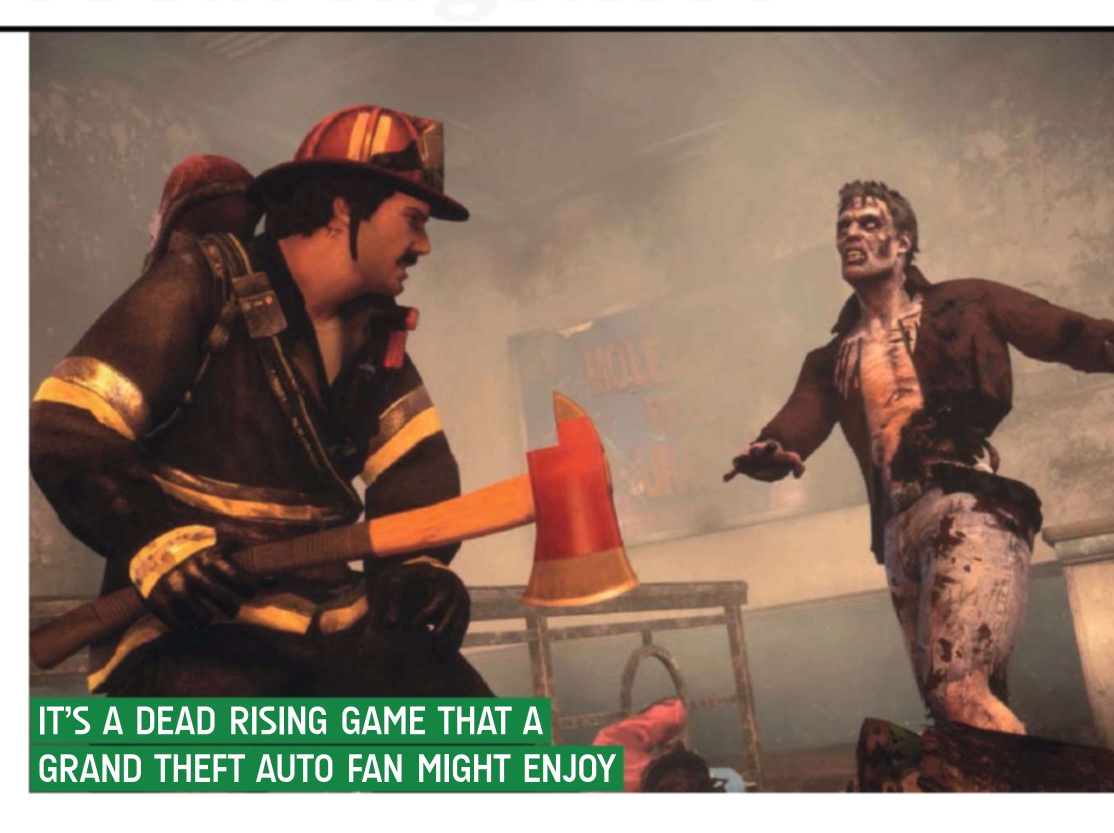
You lack confidence in the face of crowds of zombies, since you don't really have the health capabilities to deal with this many enemies at once just yet.

3 HOURS

You've just started finding the vehicle combinations across the world, and are bombarding hordes of the undead with giant balls from the side of your clown van.

3 DAYS

You've experimented with the Blanka mask and uncovered all of the ways in which you can turn this *Street Fighter* reference into a deadly weapon (a fair few).



IT'S A DEAD RISING GAME THAT A GRAND THEFT AUTO FAN MIGHT ENJOY

if you will, a *Dead Rising* game that a *Grand Theft Auto* fan might enjoy – a little more accessible, a lot less clunky in basic mechanics and so playable.

Then, of course, there are thousands of zombies haunting the streets between these gorgeously specific locations. If you're looking for the thing that makes *Dead Rising 3* 'next-gen', as it were, it's seeing all of these elements together at once: the hordes of decaying zombie character models, the wonderfully overplayed lighting effects, the densely designed streets and the laudable absence of loading screens that keeps it all together. As a technical showcase, *Dead Rising 3* is a very strong start for the Xbox One, and aside from some rarely noticeable pop-in textures, seeing this collection of visually ambitious ideas in action is genuinely impressive.

The RPG-like progression system means that sense of reward grows, too, and gradually through collecting blueprints you feel better equipped to deal with the legions of undead inhabiting the open world. While at first you may be overwhelmed, soon you're electrocuting a broad radius of enemies at once while wearing a Blanka helmet, or planting a twin-armed Freedom Bear to mow down a massive crowd of enemies. A lot of the basic elements of *Dead Rising* have returned in a more refined form – the major differences are the scale of the world and the addition of vehicles.

Vehicle combos operate much the same as weapons, but they're even simpler: park two matching vehicles next to each other then combine them, providing you have the right blueprints. The resulting vehicle usually looks like something from *Robot Wars*, with a number of gloriously hodgepodge creations that offer more colourful ways to batter the undead in a set of wheels, from turrets to projectiles and even secondary

A GAME OF FOUR HALVES

We suspect the absence of loading screens in *Dead Rising 3* can be attributed to the four regions of Los Perdidos all being separated from each other by noticeably long roads or subway tunnels. The city is laid out in four quadrants, each occupying a corner of the map with a lot of dead spots in between. If you recall the town of Bullworth in Rockstar's *Bully*, some of the same geographical rules apply, dividing the town into vaguely themed regions all with their own identities. The real bonus of all of them is seeing just how many buildings you can access in each region. Impressive stuff.

Below: Boss battles are one of the game's weak points, offering a frustratingly poor match for the combat system here. Without them, *Dead Rising 3* would quite obviously be a lot stronger.







Left: Cutscenes are contextual, so Nick will be dressed like a firefighter if you've chosen to make him look that way.

Above: You might expect the appeal of silly outfits to expire, but it really doesn't. Like *Saints Row*, it adds welcome player expression.

weapons to add further value to them. Once created, these are stored in your garage and accessible at any time, and their existence gives *Dead Rising 3* that extra layer of interaction that demonstrates a step forward for the series.

Less inspiring are the story missions themselves, which are usually just variations on fetch quests. You realise that they're essentially an attempt to get you to properly explore the different bits of the city, but they don't offer nearly the same level of feedback or ingenuity as a mission does in *Saints Row* or *GTA* – the one aspect where *Dead Rising 3*'s open-world design doesn't match up favourably.

This dovetails with the weakness of boss battles, too, which feel like they're made for a more immediate and fast-paced action experience than the DNA of *Dead Rising* really permits. While the missions generally don't contribute much in terms of ideas, boss fights are the most criminally archaic aspects of *Dead Rising 3*, despite being reasonably infrequent. They're just spam jobs, most of the time, with a couple of QTEs thrown in to generate a few sighs from anyone who's been playing games for more than four years.

There's a Nightmare Mode for those who desire a more traditional time limit-driven, difficult version of this story, and series veterans will no doubt want to at least give it a try. For us, though, going a little broader with the remit of *Dead Rising 3* actually does it a lot of favours. It now feels like *Dead Rising* operates in a similar sandbox style to *Saints Row*, a transition into awe-inspiring folly that feels natural – are time limits and difficulty really the only point of *Dead Rising*, or is occupying a zombie-infested open world at your own pace with an arsenal of ludicrous weapons a more desirable experience? It's up to you. *Dead Rising 3* offers both and greatly expands its potential audience as a result.

While the missions may feel throwaway, existing in Los Perdidos has a longer-lasting appeal. Turning a corner into a sea of zombies offers a relentlessly impressive image that always compels you to get stuck in, with or without sufficient weaponry to deal with the onslaught. Dynamic stories happen on the fly, as you always hope from this type of game – nothing to the same degree as *GTA V*, you understand, it all involves killing zombies and a few armed blokes – but the player expression offered by different costumes and visually diverse landscape makes that entirely possible.

Which brings us back round to the influence of *The Walking Dead*. It's fascinatingly odd that Capcom Vancouver chose to take that as an obvious visual touchstone for the washed-out cityscape depicted here, yet still have the types of cutscenes where a man can be wearing hot pants, a tennis shirt and a Servbot helmet and watch in horror as someone's intestines are ripped out and tossed around like wet sausages.

Yet that dichotomy is why *Dead Rising 3* remains so fun throughout: silly and serious should really never be this close together, but in this context it works. Blood is splattered onto car bonnets and windows, limbs fire off and Nick's choice of attire, from engineer civvies to basketball vest, quickly become stained with undead remains. Despite that and appropriately aggressive zombie groans, it never really tries to be scary – Capcom Vancouver instead has opted for a more striking approach, in the way that iconic poster of *The Walking Dead* is, an elevated zombie survival experience that marches to the beat of its own drum.

Capcom Vancouver has therefore given the Xbox One something that PS4 does not have right now: a strong triple-A exclusive. *Dead Rising 3* dares you to dream about high the bar can be set for the open world game during this generation on a technical and creative level, even with its obvious flaws in mission design. Not bad for a launch title.

Above: This is probably as close to a *Starsky & Hutch* sequel as you'll ever get.

FAQs

Q. IS FRANK WEST IN IT?
You can collect statues of Frank West as one of the game's many collectables, placed throughout the world.

Q. WILL I SEE EVERYTHING ON ONE PLAYTHROUGH?
Probably. If you're playing the game on normal settings, there's plenty of time to get through all the content in the open world, though some characters might die on your way through the story.

Q. ARE ZOMBIES THE ONLY ENEMIES?
No, various humans turn up in the story, too, packing their own firearms to take you out with.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

FISSION MAILED: The story missions are simply boring, and some more variation in objectives and types of foes might've mixed it up.

VERDICT 8/10
XBOX ONE LANDS WITH A NEAR-ESSENTIAL LAUNCH TITLE

DRIVING THE NEXT GENERATION

Forza Motorsport 5

There is no doubting that *Forza 5* is designed to nibble away at the petrolhead lurking inside of you. The opening sequence; a sweeping video montage narrated by Jeremy Clarkson is essentially a love letter to the motoring industry, and the amount of aerodynamic eye-candy on show will have you itching to tackle your first chicane. It's everything we love about *Forza*; the theatre the series has always been able to create, and while all that is still here, it is certainly handled differently this time.

We can't go any further though without mentioning how gorgeous the game looks, the best parts of which aren't the most obvious and ostentatious – in complete contrast to many of the cars you'll drive. Instead, the real joy of the next-gen engine is found in how parts of the cockpit reflect on the windscreen when the light hits them at the right angle, and how the sunlight can blind you as you drive into it, having you reach for an imaginary visor – it's a shame that isn't a Kinect feature. That's where the real beauty and polish of this game lies in a visual sense. *Forza* has always been a very good-looking series, and that was never going to change this time around, but the little touches help to elevate it, and remind you this is Xbox One, the next step up.

These touches do come at a price however, as the number of cars and tracks almost halves to around 200 cars and 14 tracks compared to the fourth instalment of the franchise. The argument here is quality over quantity, and considering Turn 10 completely remodelled and reshot some tracks, as well as added new ones like Spa, the home of the Belgian Grand Prix, it's not something to get too downtrodden about. Included within that list of vehicles is the new McClaren P1 and LaFerrari hypercars, as well as the Ferrari 312T and McClaren M23 from 1976 Formula One season and this season's Lotus E21. Alongside the more modest Mini Cooper it means there is still a good range of cars on offer, but the real variety comes when you race with each of them.

Forza 5 places great emphasis on how cars feel as you're driving them, with the damage system reflecting this with tyre wear and engine issues affecting performance depending on your racing style. Wheel spin, drift and general loss of control will feature heavily in your early races with each new car, and this is down to the realism that Turn 10 has deployed in car behaviour. It's coupled with haptic feedback in the controller, with the triggers responding as you hit the rev limiter and lock the brakes. It feels in your hands much the same way your feet do on the pedals of a real car, and as a result you respond to this as a driver.

With a gentle and smooth squeezing of the accelerator to take a corner with more precision rather than slamming it all the way in, it's elements like this that do genuinely make you feel like you're much more in control than in previous *Forza* instalments. It's a unique sensation, and one that heightens the experience of each race, particularly each time you upgrade or change cars. The performance and behaviour of each car becomes more apparent as you get more confident and gradually turn off the driving aids, and it feels very representative of what would happen if you tried to take a Viper so carelessly around Silverstone.

Another interesting shift in Turn 10's focus is the way the Career mode is structured this time around. No longer is there a clear rags-to-riches story; moving up from a Ford Ka to a Bugatti Veyron. Instead, everything is laid out before you as though it's a racer's buffet – with the credits and XP you earn being the only real restriction on which type of league you enter next. As a system it works well; giving the player the chance to sample new cars you see fit. There is also a big change in

DETAILS
FORMAT: Xbox One
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Turn 10
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4 (1-16 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



Below: Rather than a formatted Career mode, this time users have more choice in what type of league and series they enter.

PARTS OF THE COCKPIT REFLECT ON THE WINDSCREEN WHEN THE LIGHT HITS THEM AT THE RIGHT ANGLE, AND THE SUNLIGHT CAN BLIND YOU AS YOU DRIVE INTO IT

BETTER THAN GRID 2



WORSE THAN FORZA 4 MOTORSPORT

RIBBONS OF ASPHALT

Though there are half the number of tracks than *Forza 4*, Turn 10 has taken the time to make sure each of those captured is perfect visually. A track layout change at Silverstone meant the course was completely recaptured, and many others had lighting updates. There are also some new tracks to explore, most notably Spa-Francorchamps in Belgium and Bathurst's Mount Pleasant circuit. So while it might be disappointing to lose the likes of Suzuka and the Nürburgring, the *Top Gear* test track now comes with racing challenges that feel straight out of the often chaotic BBC show. The range may have dropped in number, but there is still a large amount of variety to the circuits on show.

FAQs

Q. WHAT ABOUT CAR CUSTOMISATION?
Still a very big part of things, and based on what you've chosen in the past, *Forza* pushes suggestions to you from the cloud.

Q. IS THERE XP TO EARN?
Plenty, and given the competitiveness of the game, finishing third is often enough for Achievements and Gold standard amounts of XP and credits.

Q. IS THERE MORE THAN JUST STRAIGHT RACES?
Traffic challenges involve having to dodge slower cars, and there are even some full-on *Top Gear* Challenge races.

Below: Cars have never felt more alive, with more response than ever to how you accelerate, brake and handle the vehicle. Your Xbox controller is more active than ever too, with haptic feedback mimicking real-life car vibrations.

Above: *Forza 5* may have half the tracks and cars of 4, but there are supercar exclusives in the form of the LaFerrari and McClaren P1, as well as more modest choices to work your way up through by earning credits.

the seriousness of the game, with challenge races at the *Top Gear* track and different race types working their way into the Career mode. Things are not as strait-laced as they used to be, and it's for the better when it comes to a fresh gaming experience.

One of the big new additions for next-gen is the Drivatar system, which utilises the cloud to deliver realistic representations of each online *Forza* driver, including you. The game monitors and learns your tactics and behaviour to keep evolving your AI and that of other gamers, so real mistakes and tendencies are on how in every race. This is very noticeable the more you play the game, with little pockets of traffic as players battle for position, becoming more aggressive at tight corners and putting up a good fight when you take a position from them.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

DRIVATAR: Thanks to this cloud-based analysis, the opposition is more unpredictable and human, making for better races.

CAR BEHAVIOUR: More prominent than ever, even down to haptic feedback through the triggers so you can feel the car.

Gone, then, are the days of *F1* titles where the rest of the field laid out the red carpet for you. The Drivatar system does a lot to make every race more memorable, and every position earned a bigger victory. The fact that Gold medal XP is handed out for third place in a lot of races shows the competitive nature of the AI, and how *Forza Motorsport 5* is trying to change the mindset of racers. This game is very different to previous ones, but the enjoyment level won't change at all.

The previous title in this series is still to many the most complete racing simulator ever made, but *Forza 5* exceeds it in several ways – not enough to displace it, but enough to fully merit its place on the *Forza* podium.

VERDICT 8/10
THE ONE TO CONVERT ARCADE RACERS TO THE SERIOUS SIDE



Above: Multiplayer features were unfortunately not available at the time of review, but we will be taking an in-depth look at their long-term value next issue.

GIVE THEM NOTHING. BUT TAKE FROM THEM EVERYTHING

Ryse: Son Of Rome

A history lesson *Ryse: Son Of Rome* most certainly is not, but it finds itself increasingly troubled by its past. Without digressing on the ins and outs of its development, it was at one stage tailored specifically to demonstrate the capabilities of Kinect on Xbox 360, but was tweaked into a traditional third-person action game as it made the leap to Microsoft's new hardware. The impact of that decision results in a game that is increasingly at odds with itself.

Unsurprisingly, the crux of the gameplay consists almost entirely of combat, executing a series of precision-based attacks, counters and blocks to dismantle enemies in a crimson mist. It's a bloody array of moves inspired in some part by the gore-drenched ferocity of the *God Of War* series, building up combos until you're able to activate an execution kill – ostensibly QTEs, subtly masked by illuminating enemies in colours that correspond to buttons – that pirouette and linger on the grisly spectacle in a manner that recalls the savagery of Zack Snyder's cinematic bloodbath *300*.

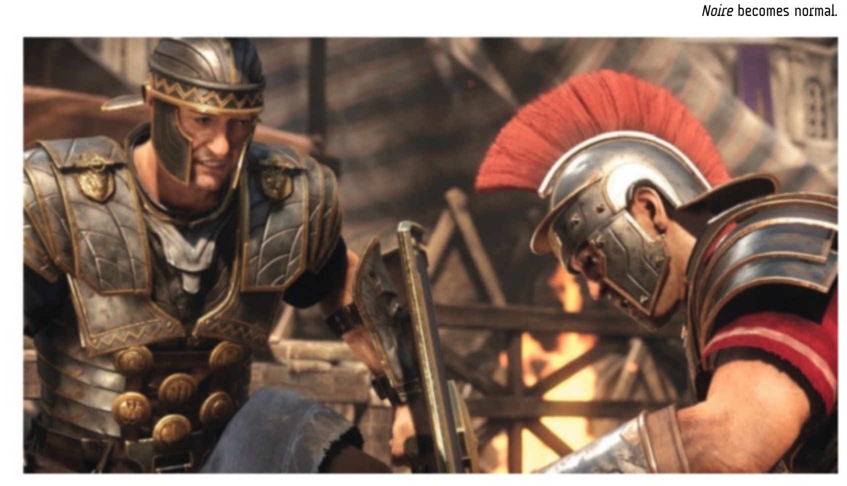
There's also another more obvious comparison to be made, but by now likening a contemporary game's stripped-back combat to the systems established in Rocksteady's *Arkham* series is a little old hat. Nevertheless, it's fundamentally the same set of mechanics, which is made more apparent here in our case by frequent and rather embarrassing attempts to counter using Y rather than *Ryse*'s mapping of A. There are notable differences, albeit mostly negative. For instance, there doesn't appear to be a major penalty for mistiming prompts during executions; the cinematic just continues to roll onwards until the enemy has met his unfortunate end, the player simply receiving slightly less XP than had they been more precise.

Once you've spent a few minutes familiarising yourself with the combat you'll essentially be countering and jabbing all the way to Rome. Bosses, of which there are a few scattered between chapters, don't require a great deal more dexterity than the Barbarians that constantly flock towards the edge of your blade, making strategy a simple choice between hitting X repeatedly or tapping Y. A focused warrior will find themselves cleaving their way through the main campaign in around five hours, but given the dearth of features we can't imagine you will be striving to stay any longer within the world.

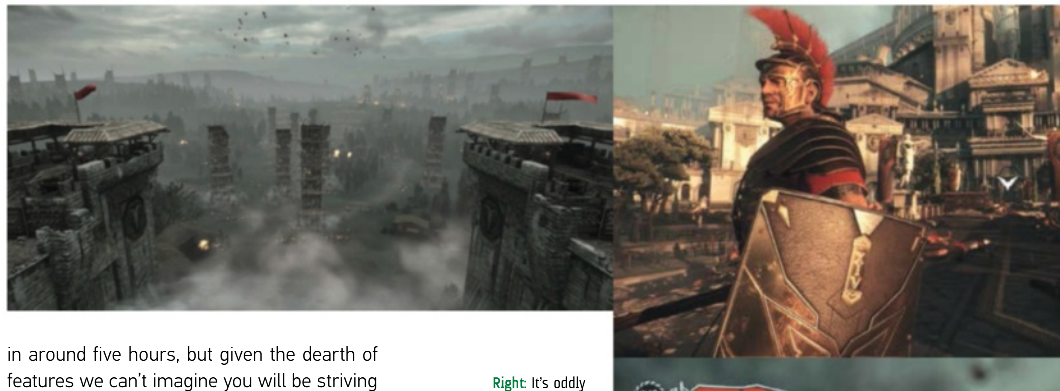
This is where the ghost of *Ryse*'s past creeps into view. The game is crushingly linear; any break from combat is spent walking a pre-determined path (mostly by looking for red or blue garments draped over ledges) that will inevitably end in another extended bout with a clan of howling marauders. Although Crytek has loosened the screws, this is still an experience that is very much on-rails. In fact, beneath the solid, punchy combat that defines *Ryse* is the Kinect game that it once was, still very visible on the surface. You'll find frequent evidence of this, from repeated set pieces where your Roman general must

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Microsoft Studios
DEVELOPER: Crytek
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (1-2 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



Right: The facial animation and motion capture work is of an impressively high quality. It's not long before the standard seen in *LA Noire* becomes normal.



Below: The most inventive setpiece involves protecting the city of York from an invading army of Britons. It reminded us of the Minas Tirith level in the *Lord Of The Rings: The Return Of The King* videogame.



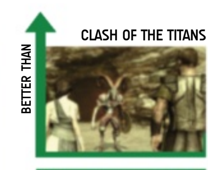
Right: It's oddly desensitising, seeing an arm cut off in this cartoon-like fashion again and again, like Milhouse's unfortunate dad.

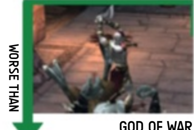
BENEATH THE SOLID, PUNCHY COMBAT THAT DEFINES RYSE IS THE KINECT GAME THAT IT ONCE WAS



BETTER THAN

CLASH OF THE TITANS





WORSE THAN

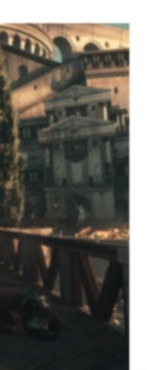
GOD OF WAR

FAQs

Q. IS KINECT USED?
Only voice commands. It also feels shoehorned, given that it takes several seconds longer to execute commands using buttons as an alternative.

Q. DOES IT FEEL NEXT-GEN?
Definitely not, but it looks the part. One of the best-looking launch titles Xbox One boasts.

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
We completed the campaign in just over six hours. However, it does feature online co-op multiplayer that was unavailable for review.



FREE TO PREY

Crytek has talked up how the company views free-to-play as the future of the industry, and *Ryse: Son Of Rome* does indeed feature some free-to-play elements woven into the main campaign. At any point during the game you can switch into the menus and upgrade your soldier in multiple categories. Here, you can either spend Valour Points or Gold, the former accumulated through performing successful executions, while the only way to attain the later (in single-player at least) is through purchasing it on Xbox Live. We were able to unlock most of the upgrades without resorting to spending real-world currency, the idea here clearly being for some players to buy an early advantage in single-player. Although we're not quite sure why anyone would bother.



lead a squad forward in phalanx formation, squatting beneath shields to block incoming arrows and returning fire at the opportune moment – everything here is constructed specifically around the motion-control device. Even the menus themselves have been designed with Kinect in mind, emulating the Xbox One dashboard itself with large icons spread across multiple screens.

Ironically, Kinect 2.0 is used sparingly throughout the game itself, but in a manner that presents an unnecessary disadvantage if you'd rather not participate. This is mostly through voice commands, enabling players to bark orders at soldiers during battle, with the alternative being hitting the left bumper. However, opt for the latter and you'll be waiting several seconds for it to execute, while shouting phrases will register instantly.

But what *Ryse* lacks in gameplay versatility it makes up for in visuals. This is a fulsome presentation, not just boasting spectacular vistas of Rome or densely packed battlefields thick with black smoke and bloodied corpses, but hugely evocative environments that aid in the immersion into the exaggerated drama of the period. Whether tensely creeping through a forest at twilight, studying the beastly shadows observing your squad or slowly making your way up the steps into the Colosseum as the sun cascades through the gates in front of you, Crytek's direction is assured and enrapturing throughout.

The plot doesn't aim for any historical accuracy, and there's something about the way the last half of the campaign spirals into absurdity that has to be admired. You step into the skirt of Roman general Marius Titus, whose unwavering commitment sets him on a course back to Rome to enact revenge on those who wronged him. It's a whole heap of dumb fun that echoes the similarly themed *God Of War* and, weirdly, *BioShock Infinite*. By the time you embark on a series of Gladiatorial events inside Rome's most famous amphitheatre, the stadium lowering and shifting itself like a Rubik's cube to unveil new environments like a sword-and-sandals rendition of *The Hunger Games*, you will have stopped caring about the politicking and be happy to ride the madness until its climax.

It's easy to see a new franchise in *Ryse*; one that could potentially rival *God Of War* if it maintains the momentum of the latter half of the campaign. However, the gameplay is so rote and uninspired that it merely hints at a more robust and rewarding experience that it fails to deliver. Ultimately, it makes for a few hours of passing entertainment, but it's certainly not one for the history books.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

THIS IS MADNESS: Go all-out on the over-the-top nature of the story, and in the process deliver a rollicking narrative without all the po-faced melodrama that is currently included.

VERDICT 6/10
SLIGHT BUT ENTERTAINING WHILE IT LASTS

NO-ONE'S GONNA SAVE YOU FROM THE BEAST ABOUT TO STRIKE

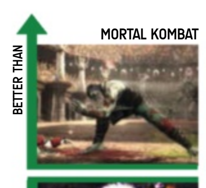
Killer Instinct

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
ORIGIN: America
PUBLISHER: Microsoft Studios
DEVELOPER: Double Helix Games
PRICE: Free (£34.99 full unlock)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN

MORTAL KOMBAT





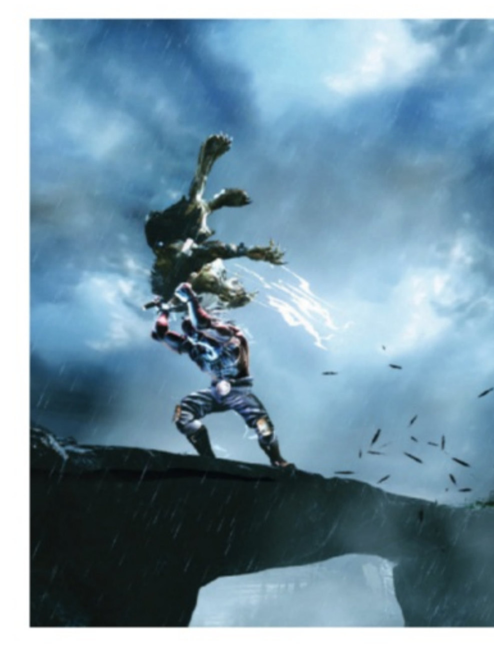
WORSE THAN

STREET FIGHTER X TEKKEN

***Killer Instinct* works very differently from other fighters – where other titles in the genre allow combos, *Killer Instinct* is built around them.** Initially, the game is deceptively shallow; instigate a chain with an opener, pad it out with some weak moves and link it into a super move for an acceptable amount of damage. Rinse, repeat and voila – you have a game. There are only six playable characters in the roster, too – so how much depth can the title offer?

A surprising amount, to be honest. There are a very limited amount of game modes to enjoy – single players have the option of a Survival mode, and that's it. Competitive players can indulge in local co-op or online battles (not even with lobbies), and there's no tag mode, no option to fight more than one person at a time, no option to engage in anything other than a one-on-one fight. The bulk of the game is actually based in its Dojo – a venue where you're walked through a series of tutorial missions, teaching you some of the more technical aspects of the game. It's here that *Killer Instinct* drops its shallow disguise and shows you just how deep the mechanics of the game can be.

We say can because, frankly, the game also involves a lot of button-mashing. Far more than you should be able to get away with. At its core, it's all very rock-paper-scissors; start up a combo, flesh it out with some one button-tap moves, throw a few special moves in and close the whole thing with a powerful slamming attack. At any time, your opponent can break your chain with the infamous 'C-C-C-C-Combo Breaker!' rendering you vulnerable and open for the adversary to do, well, exactly the same combo pattern back to you. It's all very formulaic, and if you understand how to work the system, you can take advantage of the AI with ease. However, throw down against the computer on a harder difficulty (or a human adversary that knows what they're doing) and the game offers more of itself to



Above: The battle zones themselves aren't bad, but they aren't as detailed as you'd think considering there are only six.

Below: Each character can supercharge their special moves – a la EX Specials from other fighters – to add extra hits to the standard attack or increase range/power. The visual effect upon performing Shadows is incredible, distorting the screen with the milky smears of the fighter's silhouette.



FAQs

Q. CAN I GRAPPLE?
Yes; aside from each character's throw, Thunder also has a slew of deadly grapples available to him, making him deadly up close.

Q. CAN I CANCEL?
Yes – some characters' Instinct moves even necessitate you cancelling the animation to segway into a special attack.

Q. IS THERE A PLOT?
Well, this is a fighting game… but even then, there is absolutely no story or plot *whatsoever*. Not even an arcade mode.

Below: Take enough damage or perform enough Breakers and you can activate Instinct Mode – a mode that does something different for each character. Orchid unleashes a flaming jaguar across the screen, for example. Why does she have this power? We have absolutely no clue.



C-C-C-C-COMBO BREAKER!

The Combo Breaker system has received an overhaul in its evolution to fit the Xbox One; a Breaker is now activated by matching button-presses to fit an enemy's move. If they're laying into you with medium-strength auto attacks, you break that assault by tapping medium-punch and medium-kick together. The same goes for light and heavy combos. It's all about being attentive, and the focus is on not just knowing your own moveset, but learning the opponents, too. Saying that, we pitted a technical fighter against our resident button-masher, and both of them seemed to combo-break each other's moves fairly often – that's when Counter Breakers come in. They're basically Combo Breakers that break Combo Breakers… start learning to cancel those cancels, fighters.

IT'S ALL VERY FORMULAIC, AND IF YOU UNDERSTAND HOW TO WORK THE SYSTEM, YOU CAN TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE AI WITH EASE

you; the combo systems branch off in multiple directions – each of the six characters have a distinct playstyle, complemented by their unique movepools.

While techniques are divided into punches and kicks – with light, medium and heavy variations of each – no two fighters' movesets feel even remotely similar. This variety is compounded by how each handles; Glacius is punishingly slow, but makes up for this with his ranged moves – he's become a textbook zoner. Sabrewulf's moves are pathetically weak, but his relentless speed makes up for that, closing distances with ease to mercilessly shred your opponent's shins. Jago is the game's arbitrary Ryu – easily the most accessible and versatile character, a clear choice for the one automatically free fighter. Thunder – an unashamed racial stereotype – is sluggish, but can soak up punishment without interruption and has access to some devastating sweeping moves. Sadira fights like Tekken's Zafina, with added web-slinging projectile moves that can create confusing high/low combos that are a nightmare to guard against. Orchid can close long-distances with ease and maintain aerial combos easier than other characters. Each time a fight loads against a character, you have to consider their movepool and adjust your strategy for them much more than you would in, say, *Mortal Kombat* or *SoulCalibur*.

The limited amount of characters makes sense, because mastering each of them will take forever – six characters and six discernibly different fighting styles suits exactly what *Killer Instinct* seems to be going for. However, the lack of modes is unforgivable – one single-player battle mode in a game that has an *Ultra* edition retailing at £34.99? That seems very restrictive to us – there's the promise of a Story Mode in March, but we can't see even that fleshing the content out too much.

There is a shallow customisation option available, but this only offers four different parts of the character to swap out, and only four options of each (two of these come as standard for 2P skins, too). There are six arenas, one 'home' environment per fighter, each with a very fitting soundtrack (Sabrewulf's discordant violin trills and cello arpeggios being our favourite). The soundtrack is dynamic, too – if you and your opponent lock into a guard-heavy battle, this is reflected in the music becoming 'neutral' – slower, more deliberate music composed to build tension, we assume. This is something we've not seen in a fighting game before, and it works wonderfully well.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TAG ART: We appreciate *Killer Instinct* is a one-on-one game, but we feel it'd benefit hugely from a tag option; mixing a zoner like Glacius with a shredder like Sabrewulf? Yes please.

Killer Instinct is the only beat-'em-up currently available on next-gen hardware. It was an odd choice by Microsoft to revive the IP – it hasn't exactly got the cult following a lot of other fighters have – but it fills the gap nicely. It works as a puddle-deep button-mash service and it works as a technical fighting-championship viable game, too. The asking price per character is far too steep for what's actually on offer, though, and the game does nothing that couldn't have been done last-gen (aside from the resolution and some nice particle effects). It's by no means a bad fighter – we've played far worse – but it just feels so restricted, so held back by its lack of roster and variety of modes.

There's plenty of depth to the mechanics here for those that want to sink their teeth into a new fighting system, and there are some informed nods back to the franchise's roots, but if you were intending to buy an Xbox One on the promise of playing this until you could afford another launch game, chances are you'll get bored of it by the end of launch week.



VERDICT 6/10
HELD BACK BY A HEFTY PRICE TAG AND LACK OF CONTENT



Above: There is a range of enrichments that you can place in each exhibit. Animals will react more positively to specific toys, such as the antelope here that loves nothing more than kicking some giant balls on a stick.

CHIMPANZEE THAT

Zoo Tycoon

Carol the Bengal tiger is pregnant. What thrilling news. We're alerted of this joyous revelation by a small notification in the top left corner of the screen. 'That'll surely rope in more punters,' we think, gloating as we imagine our coffers overflowing as the gates of our zoo swell with eager visitors. Another notification follows: 'The Chimpanzees have flung their poop everywhere, you might want to get on that', or something along those lines. Oh, well, back to work.

Zoo Tycoon balances the administrative side of running a public attraction and mucking on the ground level to keep everything ticking over. So while you'd perhaps like to dedicate a great deal more time to securing research facilities, exploring advertising campaigns, or tweaking the rates of various facilities dotted around the park ('bleed 'em dry' was our unfaltering methodology), there are always mundane chores to be done, from delivering hotdogs to the fast food restaurant, repairing the showers in the elephant enclosure or just making sure that the bins have been emptied around the park. The result is a sim-lite, demonstrating a more personal touch beyond the macro engagement.

The general ambiance is one of cuteness and this is facilitated by the ability to step right into the wellies of the amiable zookeeper themself. Here you can wander around at your leisure and interact with the patrons (wave into the Kinect sensor and the zoo-goers will happily wave back) and scoot around the park in one of the buggies (you can't crumple visitors beneath your wheels no matter how persistent you are, they awkwardly shift out of your way), while you'll also be able to interact with the animals themselves.

Kinect works surprisingly well in that regard. Each exhibit can be installed with one of three different animal interactions that can be controlled with motion controls: using a hose to wash some of the larger animals down, a feeding station to allow elephants to scoop-up fruit from your palm and then there's the interactive glass panel, which reflects your own face as you pull various exaggerated expressions that chimpanzees can mimic.

Of course, this is familiar territory for Frontier Developments, who delivered one of

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Frontier Developments
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (1-4 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

THERE'S A NOTICEABLE LACK OF DIFFICULTY OR REQUIREMENT OF SKILL TO REALLY SUSTAIN THE PLAY BEYOND A FEW HOURS

FAQs

Q. WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE ANIMAL?
Mongoose. Unfortunately it wasn't featured.

Q. CAN I TORTURE THEM?
Slow down, sicko. The interactions with animals are strictly limited to pleasant things.

Q. NOT EVEN A LITTLE BIT?
Well, they can be neglected. However, a helicopter will come along and airlift them to a better zoo.



Left: The easiest way to manage the zoo is in Tycoon mode, which also enables you to teleport your zookeeper quickly around the park.



Right: The animals themselves are incredibly detailed, striking a balance between realism and cartoonish quirkiness.

Below: Alongside the larger exhibits, mini ones can be placed that house smaller animals. Lizards, birds and smaller mammals can become a cheap way to attract visitors.

Xbox 360's more accomplished Kinect games, *Kinectimals*. *Zoo Tycoon* tries to marry that concept of frolicking with adorable critters to that of the bean counting of the *Tycoon* franchise (of which the studio also had a hand in developing over the years) and it does so with some success, albeit at the concession of the simulation at the core, which feels neutered for a younger demographic.

Outside of the zookeeper third-person perspective that enables you to explore the park, the majority of the time will be spent in the overhead Tycoon mode that offers an overview of the entire zoo. Here you can drop concessions, exhibits and facilities down onto the map, the engine itself generating walkways that connect the park together, which inherently removes a level of intense customisation that some might anticipate. This also applies to the exhibits themselves, where the ability to sculpt and delineate the proportions is a sad omission; there's no true sense of artistry to your own zoo, the jigsaw pieces simply slotting together to create an identikit design no different to a thousand other players'.

There are two modes that this specifically applies to: Challenge and Freeform. The latter encourages players to collaborate online to create a utopian animal sanctuary with unlimited cash, so it's in the former where the challenge of maintaining and expanding a zoo really comes into the fore. A third mode is Campaign, which places you in established zoos around the world with specific tasks to complete with a time frame.

There's nothing wrong with the trio of options available themselves – there's a nice variety here that has the potential to increase longevity – but there's a noticeable lack of difficulty or requirement of skill to really sustain the play beyond a few hours. The initial beguilement and thrill of exploring your zoo, gradually filling the exhibits and interacting with the animals themselves, soon subsides to menial tasks and general upkeep. There are only a handful of actual animals that can populate your zoo (although they each have a few breeds to choose from), meaning that once you've reach around level 10 of fame (the game's unique levelling system that unlocks new exhibits, animals and items as you progress) you'll have seen most of what the game has to offer.

Periodic challenges offer a quick jolt of excitement later down the line as you're tasked with completing set objectives within a increasingly narrow time frame, however these soon repeat themselves and the penalty for outright ignoring them is minor enough where neglecting them doesn't really impede your profits – and who would really want to release their prize Lion Wenslydale back into the wild just to appease some mysterious benefactor?

It's hard to image *Zoo Tycoon* finding huge success, in all honesty, such is it an obvious slave to two masters. On the one hand it's a kiddie-friendly Kinect-led experience that'll find itself a welcome babysitter, yet the presence of the simulation, despite its shallow nature, raises the age gate with a more mature gamer in mind. Ultimately, *Zoo Tycoon* will have a very narrow appeal beyond families. Those that do venture through the gates of their own zoo to fulfil their daydreams of owning and operating an animal park will find it undeniably charming to begin with, but it's hard to determine the lasting appeal of such a flippant enterprise.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

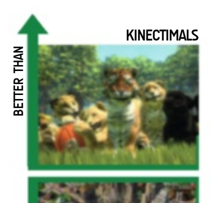
GOOD KINECTION: Animals mimic facial expressions and motions are accurately tracked when feeding and hosing different creatures. It's the best use of Kinect we've seen, and shows a lot of promise.

SAVE THE ANIMALS

Regardless of whether your attempts in *Zoo Tycoon* to keep your animals cared for and happy at all times are successfully or not, Frontier Developments' future plans for the title will have an interesting impact on real-world conservation efforts. While we weren't able to test these ourselves, the concept is that community challenges (involving releasing a specific breed of animal) will be posted that players can join and if successfully completed Microsoft will donate money to a chosen charity or zoo. We imagine these in-game goals will be easy otherwise the benevolent campaign might backfire.

BETTER THAN

KINECTIMALS



WORSE THAN



SIMCITY

VERDICT 6/10

IT'S GOT THE 'AWW' FACTOR BUT NOT A LOT ELSE



Left: The issue with the environments isn't that they look bad as such – thought they don't look especially great, in all honesty – it's that by repeating missions again and again to raise loot, you will be absolutely bored of looking at them.

HOW TO LAME YOUR DRAGON

Crimson Dragon

Xbox One's arrival with a spiritual successor to *Panzer Dragoon* demonstrates fine thinking for winning over the most hardcore players. Sadly, Grounding's attempt to recapture the spirit of Sega's classic on-rails series lacks the same sense of set piece magic, while failing to bring any new ideas to the formula outside of some perfunctory Kinect elements that most players will do without.

It's actually a lot more like *Lylat Wars* than *Panzer Dragoon*, going from straightforward on-rails shooting down a long corridor to more open spaces where you can fly freely. Even the evasive spins operate in exactly the same way. The controls are a bit iffy – one recurring objective is picking up lines of collectables. The game rates you depending on how many you pick up, but it's difficult to work out exactly where your dragon is within the 3D space as you're throttled in another direction by the game. It's just about workable enough, though. During the free-flying parts, the controls come completely undone, with your dragon feeling unwieldy as you're trying to complete an objective that requires easy 360-degree movement.

This means it's never quite as fun as the mega-streamlined *Panzer Dragoon Orta*, for example, but this gameplay would be entertaining enough without the structural issues of *Crimson Dragon* that require grinding in order to level up your dragon. A huge focus is placed on currency – extra lives in the game, called revival gems, have to be purchased at a premium in the game's shop, while some of the better dragons are acquired in this fashion, too. Collecting money essentially requires farming of levels you've previously beaten, with credits granted for wiping out groups of enemies down to the last foe.

What could've been a straightforward *Panzer Dragoon* homage with a leaning towards customisation is instead laden down by an unfortunately boring in-game progression system. Levelling up more than one dragon to maximum will require a time investment that *Crimson Dragon* doesn't really deserve. It's pleasing that there are so many abilities available to be unlocked, but a lot of them are pretty similar – there's no real benefit for having them all in there. The levels repeat the same three objectives and there aren't really enough different environments either. It's also obvious from the quality of the visuals that its life began on Xbox 360.

Crimson Dragon is simply a bit boring. If you loved *Panzer Dragoon Orta* on Xbox and were hoping for a similarly frenetic and beautifully-designed shooter here, you'll be let down. This is only similar in an elementary sense – the grind-heavy focus of *Crimson Dragon* and lack of setpiece variety let down what could've been a winning cult hit on Xbox One.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Grounding Inc
PRICE: $19.99 (UK price not available)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-3
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN

REIGN OF FIRE





WORSE THAN

PANZER DRAGOON ORTA

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

WING MAN: One of the better additions is the idea of recruiting another dragon to help you in battle. They provide assistance during battle and can be manoeuvred forwards or backwards with the D-pad.



VERDICT 4/10
AN UNFORTUNATE MISS



Above: It simply isn't as inspiring as *Panzer Dragoon* was, or as exciting to play. Those looking for a spiritual successor will only find disappointment here.



BIKER GROOVE

LocoCycle

***LocoCycle* is the sort of game you instinctively feel you want to get behind due to the obvious presence of unique thinking in its premise.** Twisted Pixel's latest follows the story of sentient motorcycle IRIS and Pablo, a mechanic who she drags around at ridiculous speeds, and this surprisingly well-detailed story is accompanied by live-action cutscenes and constant voiceover. *LocoCycle* is initially very enjoyable due to its marriage of different elements from popular genres, but the ideas unfortunately soon run dry.

After a live-action introduction that elicits no laughs whatsoever, and the initial hump of realising that IRIS is basically GLADoS with a bit of a potty mouth and a lack of political correctness, *LocoCycle* gets funny very quickly. Her refusal to acknowledge anything the hapless Pablo screams as he's pulled along is a decent source of humour, and the bike's ruminations on popular culture are frequently laugh-out-loud funny, even if the well-produced live-action cutscenes are somehow never entertaining.

Some of the humour will be interpreted as offensive, but only by the type of player who can't understand the purpose of certain jokes in shows like *The Office* or *Community* where the point is to laugh at the ridiculousness of the character and not the joke itself, but if anything, it's nice to see a developer be daring with humour in a game. Robert Patrick voices rival bike SPIKE, and some of his wrestling move sounds are hysterically funny. It's the best thing about *LocoCycle*, since the gameplay wears out its welcome quickly.

There's a little bit of *Spy Hunter* in the premise of speeding along and taking out enemies on the fly. It also feels like *Bayonetta* has had a strong influence; during chases, the combat is split about 50/50 between shooting enemies on the road and taking them out in a hack-and-slash combat framework. Despite unlockable extra abilities, this gets tired after the first couple of levels since there's little demanded of you outside of button mashing.

The difficulty level then spikes in the game's second half with a terrible addition called 'science balls': enemies in electric balls that roll at IRIS and do annoying amounts of damage, are so frustrating that they kill a lot of the game's early goodwill, and as the checkpointing gets spottier, repeating these does *LocoCycle* no favours at all. Boss battles, too, take excessive amounts of time, and setpieces recur to the extent that their welcome is thoroughly outstayed.

With that in mind, we advise not playing *LocoCycle* in more than hour-long chunks. Despite its repetition, the tone of Twisted Pixel's most ambitious title to date makes it worth sticking with. If you're looking for a graphical showcase on Xbox One, this isn't it, but it's far from a bad start to unique XBLA-style releases on the new platform.

DETAILS

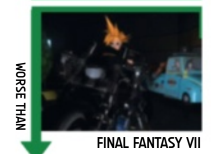
FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Twisted Pixel Games
PRICE: $19.99 (UK price not available)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN



MOTO GP 07

WORSE THAN



FINAL FANTASY VII



Below: Hovering over these giant battleships is a highlight of the game's set pieces, though once again it goes on for a little longer than you would really like it to.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

BRINGING THE FUNNY: Minus the dreadful live-action cutscenes, all the in-game humour of *LocoCycle* is spot-on, representing strong writing and mostly decent voice-acting.



VERDICT 6/10

A UNIQUELY ENTERTAINING PASTICHE THAT LOSES TRACTION





Above: Speeding up is fun in *LocoCycle*, but it serves no real purpose, since the backgrounds endlessly repeat and the playing space is actually quite small.

DICE GOES TO WAR WITH THE NEXT GENERATION

Battlefield 4

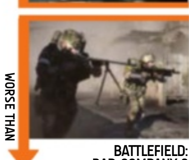
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Xbox One, PS3, X360
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts
DEVELOPER: DICE
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1 (2-64 Online)
MIN SPEC: Vista 32-bit, Dual-core CPU (min 2.2GHz), 512Mb GPU, 4GB RAM, 30GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

BATTLEFIELD 3





WORSE THAN

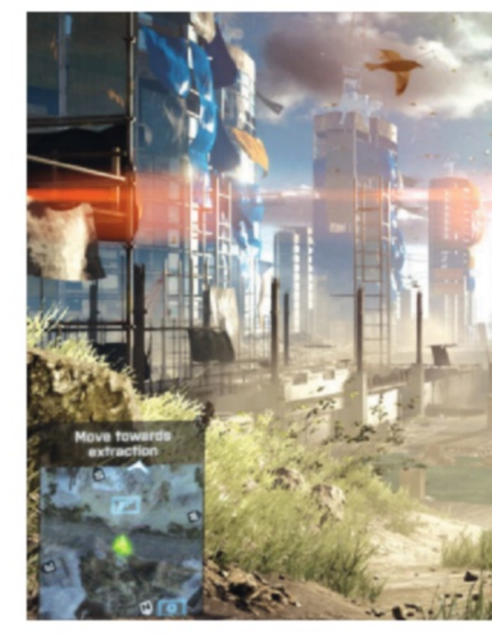
BATTLEFIELD: BAD COMPANY 2

War is hell. The ongoing conflict between the *Battlefield* franchise and its cousin *Call Of Duty* has raged on for years now, and the tandem releases of *Battlefield 4* and *Call Of Duty: Ghosts* will do nothing to close what has become a vast divide in the genre. And yet, despite the huge differences in tone and execution running through each franchise, they both remain bastions for a genre that has been stale for a number of years. Gone are the lurid, intoxicating days of *Bad Company 2* and *Call Of Duty 4*; both have been replaced over time by more generic derivatives.

What is true of both franchises is this: multiplayer, once an afterthought, is now king. The more obtuse the single-player aspects of first-person shooters become, the easier it is to see that developers have nothing left to give in terms of an engrossing narrative, and so now it is online where development teams get to properly purvey their wares. This is still very much the case when turning to *Battlefield 4*. Although it adheres more to the sensibilities of the genre's heyday than those of its direct predecessor, it's still flogging a dead horse when it comes to its single-player campaign. This isn't the reason we came to the party, but having a strong campaign mode would have lifted this instalment of the franchise to loftier heights than *Battlefield 3*.

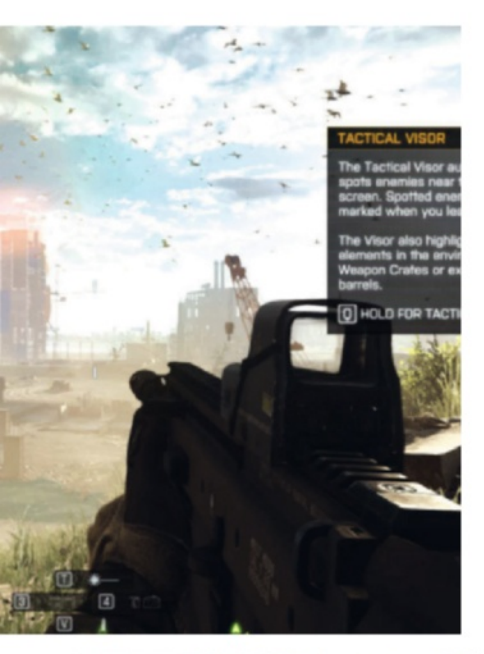
BF4 does serve as a reliable litmus test for next-gen gaming. The visuals here are absolutely stunning on Ultra settings (which themselves surpass next-gen consoles) and certainly set the bar for the exciting months ahead. This is most obvious during the game's single-player mode, with lighting effects and motion blur in particular proving to be, dare we say it, lifelike. There's still the occasional texture pop-in and similar little issues, but in general it's a beautiful game.

To attempt to avoid the proverbial sins of the father, DICE has introduced a score attack element to its single-player mode. What this does is shift the focus away from the usual 'follow the man to the thing' template, encouraging the player to approach firefights in a slightly more considered manner. By seeking out headshots and 'engage'



Above: The single-player mode's first level heads towards its climax in this open battleground. This particular moment is especially impressive, as a flock of seagulls occupies the sky above.

Below: There are certain moments in the campaign where it is clear that DICE has attempted to pander to the Bruckheimer/Bay-esque FPS template perpetuated by *COD*.



FAQs

Q. IS IT FULL OF SNIPERS?
No, this time round it appears that there are a few less snipers lurking cowardly in the shadows online.

Q. IS MULTIPLAYER TOUGH?
If you're new to it, it will seem difficult at first. Remember: tactics and patience always prevail in *Battlefield* multiplayer.

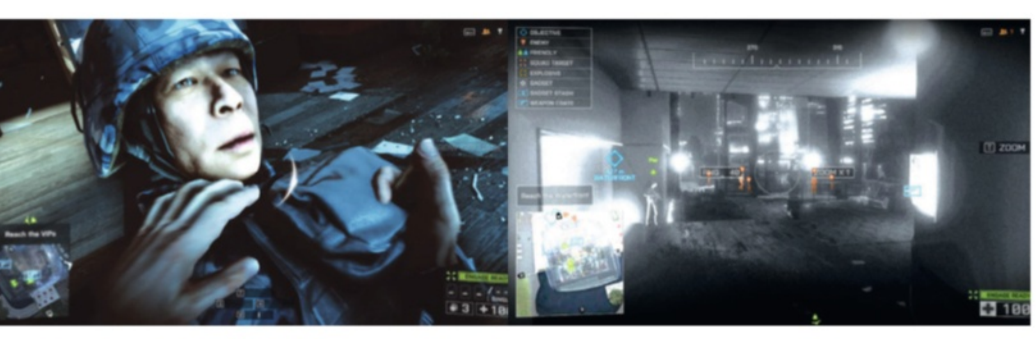
Q. IS IT JUST NEXT-GEN?
No, *Battlefield 4* is available on current-gen consoles, although it is quite inferior to its next-gen counterpart.

Below: A lot of these squad-based perilous moments are quite hard to care about, as the characterisation in *Battlefield 4* is less than impressive.



Children Of The Levolution

Inherent in *Battlefield 4*'s multiplayer is the Levolution system. The collapsing skyscraper on the Siege Of Shanghai map is a good example of this system; a series of game-altering events that are triggered through player interaction to adapt the map to their advantage. In essence, Levolution is an attempt to hand players more choice when approaching objectives, although the events themselves aren't exactly life changing. The skyscraper in particular borders on gimmickry, and does little to influence your playing style when it happens. Flood Zone boasts, understandably, a flood event that does radicalise the map, and yet it's lost in translation, as the only meaningful difference is that you have to use boats to traverse the map as opposed to tanks and APCs.



IT BUILDS NICELY ON THE FOUNDATIONS LAID BY PREVIOUS ITERATIONS AND IS HEAD AND SHOULDERS ABOVE COD IN TERMS OF FUNCTIONALITY AND DEPTH

manoeuvres – essentially performing on-the-fly reconnaissance of the enemy and instructing your NPC squad-mates to attack on your cue – you can rack up extra points that proffer you medals and weapon unlocks.

It's an interesting mechanic, and one that would afford *BF4*'s campaign more in the way of longevity than most other shooters if there was any sort of challenge present. Unfortunately, though, DICE's game is very easy to beat, and getting Gold on each level will be no challenge at all for most players. What this new emphasis doesn't do is distract the player from what is, yet again, a FPS bereft of any narrative weight. The player-character, Recker, is a silent protagonist and offers nothing in the way of immersion. Your compatriots are Pac, an irritatingly affirming man-child, and Irish, a hothead portrayed well by Michael K Williams, aka *The Wire*'s Omar and *Boardwalk Empire*'s Chalky White. Neither of these characters manage to lift the overall narrative, which is your standard 'rogue nation goes to war with the US' story.

CONNECTED
EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

COMMANDER MODE: After reaching Level 10 in multiplayer, you can connect to the game via a tablet, offering strategic support from above to players on the ground in the form of air strikes and choppers.

Of course, when you take *BF4* online you become privy to DICE's true talents. Multiplayer here is of the same standard as it always has been, offering immersive and tactical large-scale combat that delivers on almost every front. It still has dodgy spawn points and affords players in vehicles more XP if they exploit them correctly, but it builds nicely on the foundations laid by previous iterations and is head and shoulders above *Call Of Duty* in terms of functionality and depth. Spending 30 minutes wearing away the enemy in a titanic battle over a Conquest objective remains to be more satisfying than a wild ten-minute jaunt on a restrictive map, and feels even more personal still. At the end of the round you can look at the scoreboard and feel proud of the lives you have sacrificed for the mission.

Call Of Duty's love for frenetic, inconsequential slaughter is – and will continue to be – excellent fun. But what *BF4* manages to do is juxtapose this bloodlust against team-based mechanics that value the whole over the individual – a quality that is more preferable in the long run. The new game types aren't a huge departure from what has come before, and old favourites like Rush and Conquest continue to remain enjoyable. It would have been nice to see some real innovation here, however, as the new modes are just adaptations of existing ones. The new maps are excellent for the most part, with Paracel Storm's turbulent archipelago proving to be a particular highlight.

It is worth noting that *BF4* was suffering from significant bugs and crashes at the time of going to print, although DICE has been reasonably transparent regarding how it plans to deal with them over time. The fact that a triple-A title such as this one can be released in such a state is, however, indicative of a wider problem in the industry.

So once again, DICE hasn't managed to craft a strong solo shooter, although it has at least realised that it can't get by on 'follow the man' mechanics alone. Multiplayer, on the other hand, is of the same standard as before and is more than worth your time. Frostbite 3 is an impressive beast and hopefully signals a bright future for EA's flagship shooter with its destructible environments and excellent character physics. It is no masterpiece, but *Battlefield 4* is a good starting point for the genre moving into the next generation. And boy, is it pretty.

VERDICT 7/10
IT'S PROGRESSIVE, BUT CERTAINLY NOT A CLASSIC

THE LESS THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME

Call Of Duty: Ghosts

***Call Of Duty* games are always at their best when they are at their worst.** When the world (well, the US) is under attack by faceless enemies with access to the sort of weaponry and armies that would make modern nations tremble, that's when Infinity Ward can focus on the setpieces and spectacle it does best. It's perhaps no surprise that this stands strongest right at the start of *Ghosts*, when there are no initial concerns for pacing, variety or innovation. It opens with a small town being smashed to pieces by laser strikes from orbit, the ground being torn apart as you're forced to leap across the gaps to safety, before play switches to a zero-gravity shoot-out in a space station far above earth. It's thrilling stuff, as Infinity Ward builds on *Modern Warfare 3*'s global punch-up by looking to the stars and later in *Ghosts*, to the sea – two of the only remaining battlefields yet to be conquered by the series.

But this desperate search for new territory also speaks volumes about how Infinity Ward has really struggled to push the *Call Of Duty* formula forward in any meaningful or significant ways, held back by its creaky engine and two-year development period. As with other *Call Of Duty* titles, *Ghosts* is a series of shooting galleries stitched together by explosions, clumsy attempts at emotional storytelling and gameplay gimmicks such as remote sniping or using Riley the dog to attack enemies. While *Black Ops II* had its sci-fi setting and branching paths to at least give the appearance of something fresh, even this token effort is beyond *Ghosts*. It's particularly disappointing given this is the first next-gen effort too – besides prettier lighting and some added effects (more dust when the church crumbles and falls off the cliff!), there's little to tell the versions apart.

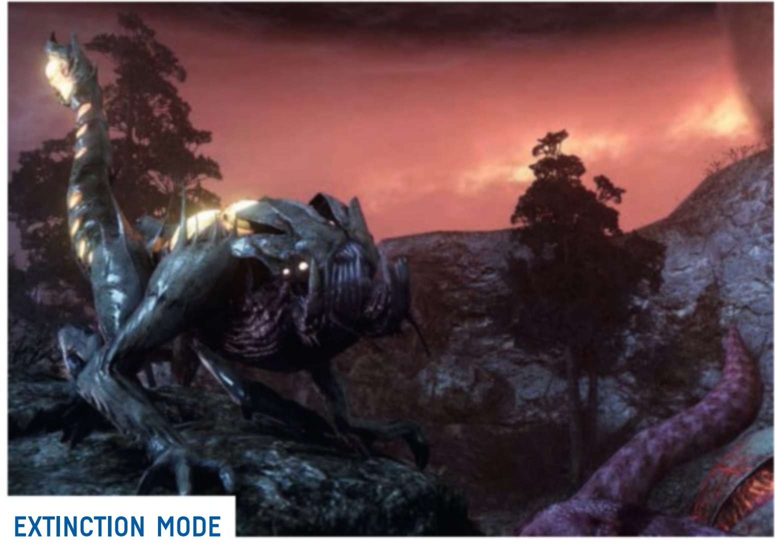
If *Ghosts* is a disappointingly predictable six-hour romp that offers nothing new, it's still somewhat enjoyable, simply because the foundations of the series are so strong. *Call Of Duty*'s gunplay is incredibly slick, the generous auto-aim built with analogue sticks in mind and the unique reloading animations, sonic booms of the audio and click of a fresh magazine being slapped into its gun highlighting the perverse attention to detail. There's little to fault in the moment-to-moment gameplay and *Ghosts*

DETAILS

FORMAT: Playstation 4
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, Xbox One, Xbox 360, PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: £49.99
DEVELOPER: Infinity Ward
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2 (1-18 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: YES



Above: Extinction mode is the replacement for Spec Ops and is far more engaging, thanks to the *Payday*-style classes and equipment. Right: One of the new gameplay twists in single-player is rappelling down the side of a building, which allows for some impressive city-at-night visuals but doesn't advance the aim-at-enemy-shoot-an-enemy gameplay in any meaningful way.



EXTINCTION MODE

While Treyarch had seen its zombies mode grow in popularity through its *Call Of Duty* entries, until zombies eventually had its own community away from the full-blooded chaos of traditional multiplayer, Infinity Ward's Spec Ops mode never really found an audience. Extinction mode should change that. Pitting you and three co-op buddies against a wave of aliens, it shows some imagination and ambition sorely missing elsewhere, adopting *Payday*-style mechanics as you use drills to bust through alien hives and select different classes to buy ammo, upgrades and equipment for the team to use. There's only one map – spot the space being saved for future DLC – but the challenge and variety on offer even with this single map is more than enough to suggest a healthy future for Extinction.



BETTER THAN

CALL OF DUTY 3



WORSE THAN

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS II

FAQs

Q. HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO COMPLETE SINGLE-PLAYER?
Roughly six hours on default difficult, fewer if you've completed *Call Of Duty* games before and you know what you're doing.

Q. HOW DIFFICULT IS IT ON VETERAN?
Roughly the same as *Modern Warfare 3*. It's doable and grenade spam isn't nearly the problem it has been in previous series entries.

Q. ANY SECRETS OR BONUSES TO FIND?
There are Intel laptops which unlock backstory in a similar fashion to the original *Black Ops* – fun but not essential.

never puts a foot wrong. It's just a shame that it doesn't have the ambition to dare step into new territory.

Multiplayer shows a little progress. The perk system has been changed, this time attributing a value to each perk and giving you a certain amount of points to spend for your created class. Although not revolutionary, it allows freedom with the perks you select without any obvious imbalances, and even running a pure stealth or pure sniping class forces you to make compromises and leave some useful perks behind. It encourages experimentation and flexibility.

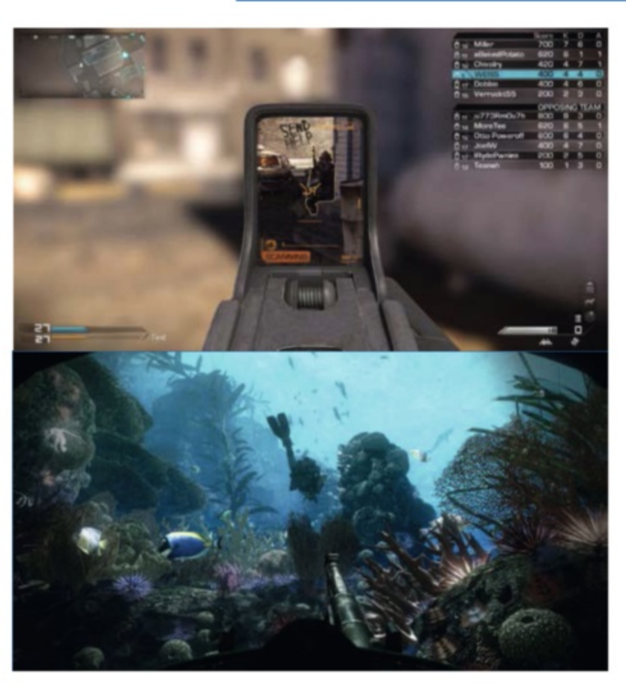
Perhaps more importantly, Infinity Ward has toned down some of the more divisive elements of multiplayer. Melee kill animations take much longer to finish, making them more of a calculated risk than they were previously, quickscoping is all but gone and killstreaks now serve as useful bonuses rather than something that will dominate the match when active. There's very little to complain about in terms of raw mechanics – Infinity Ward has seemingly listened to the angry keyboard clattering on *Call Of Duty* forums worldwide and stamped out *most* of the aggravating multiplayer elements.

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

BLITZ: The best new game mode is Blitz, when you have to run into the enemy's zone to score a point. Defending against human players bombing towards the capture point is an interesting, unusual challenge.

Still, the flow and pace of multiplayer is vastly different to *Black Ops II*. The short, punchy map design and power of sub-machine guns in *Black Ops II* meant it was dominated by CQC battles, with quick reactions vital. *Ghosts* has gone as far in the other direction as it's possible for a *Call Of Duty* game to go. The maps are far bigger and the player-count is lower (12 max on current-gen, 18 max on next-gen), while the longer-range weapons can compete with sub-machine guns. This leads to a slower, more cautious style of play, which is the diplomatic way of saying that there's a lot of camping. Perhaps this will shift when the community becomes more familiar with the maps loadouts but for now, and for those who want to thrive in the online side of *Ghosts*, multiplayer is a surprisingly slow, ponderous affair in comparison to *Black Ops II*, or even *Modern Warfare 3*'s multiplayer.

INFINITY WARD HAS REALLY STRUGGLED TO PUSH THE CALL OF DUTY FORMULA FORWARD IN ANY MEANINGFUL OR SIGNIFICANT WAYS



Above: Multiplayer is more balanced than it has been in previous years but combined with the large maps, almost feels bland because of it. **Left:** The challenge for Extinction mode can be ramped up by unlocking and applying Relics, which impose restrictions on players such as increasing enemy damage.

And despite Infinity Ward's promise of using new match-making algorithms and pushing the heavy lifting onto dedicated servers for the first time in the series' history, the netcode in *Ghosts* feels as though it hasn't progressed at all. You'll still be shot when you think you're around corners. You'll still notice the killcam doesn't match-up with what you think actually happened in-game. You'll still find yourself raging at the small inconsistencies that continue to plague *Call Of Duty*'s multiplayer. It's a shame because the mechanics are fine and the maps are enjoyable, particularly Stonehaven and White Out, Infinity Ward's attempt to break free of the circular route and three-route map design that has dominated multiplayer.

But the lack of progress in *Ghosts* is a shame for the series. With the advent of next-gen and the suddenly fierce competition coming from the likes of *Battlefield 4*, *Killzone: Shadow Fall*, *Destiny* and *Titanfall*, this needed to be one of the strongest in the series. Instead, it's one of the weakest, undermined by a startling lack of ambition and fear of trying anything new.

VERDICT 6/10
MULTIPLAYER IS THE SAVIOUR BUT IT'S ALL VERY PREDICTABLE

THE CAT'S PYJAMAS

Super Mario 3D World

The feline theme of *Super Mario 3D World* rubs up against your legs the moment you load up the game. The title, decorated with a paw-print and a tail, looks down on a 3D collection of familiar *Mario* level set-pieces that looks something like a jungle gym. A little yellow Mario-cat scampers about, clearly having the time of his life. This franchise has aged enough to enter its crazy cat lady stage, and it's going all the way.

In fact, sometimes this feels more like a game about cats in a Mario skin than the other way around. You're introduced to the tinkling bell power-up at the very start of the first level, and it reappears frequently from then on. In the Sprawling Savannah level, you chase a rabbit across those truly sprawling plains for the sake of a green star. In cat form, closing in on your prey beneath a sun-reddened sky, you could almost be playing Simba in a 3D, HD update of *The Lion King*. It's one of the best moments of the game, not because the rest is bad but because it's such a surprise that you're likely to forget about the time limit and just spend a few moments running about in childlike (or kittenlike) joy.

These cats are just as they should be: bounding, pouncing, clawing, meowing bundles of fun. They run on all fours, can scratch at an enemy from the side or pounce from above, and are far more agile than their human counterparts. Much appreciated is their ability to vault up the Goal Pole, and to scramble up vertical walls.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

HIGH DEFINITION: The Wii U makes this game so much more attractive than *Super Mario 3D Land*.

MULTIPLAYER: *Super Mario 3D Land* didn't offer any multiplayer. Here you can play on one screen.

This latter ability has clearly influenced the level design; where *Super Mario 3D Land* (3DS) took the kinds of levels found in 2D *Mario* games and expanded them horizontally, *Super Mario 3D World* has a strong interest in the vertical. The design is still familiarly cuboid, but the game's designers have had much more space to play with, and it shows.

Particularly noteworthy are those levels – like the Savannah – that dare to veer away from the typical ice/water/lava themes that we've come to expect, though those have been somewhat refreshed by the introduction of things like a giant ice skate in which to ride around. Some of *Super Mario 3D World*'s levels are just plain beautiful, and while that's sometimes thanks to static background images that draw your eye when you're forced to stop moving for one reason or another, it does serve as a strong reminder that this stylised HD will age better than attempts at photorealism.

Aside from the HD treatment, perhaps the biggest benefit *Super Mario 3D World* has over its 3DS brother is that the Wii U permits local multiplayer. As in *New Super Mario Bros. U*, up to four players can assume the roles of four different characters, though here each has a different set of skills, which makes things more interesting.

Princess Peach, for instance, is particularly useful thanks to her ability to float a little at the end of a jump (which she

THIS FRANCHISE HAS AGED ENOUGH TO ENTER ITS CRAZY CAT LADY STAGE, AND IT'S GOING ALL THE WAY



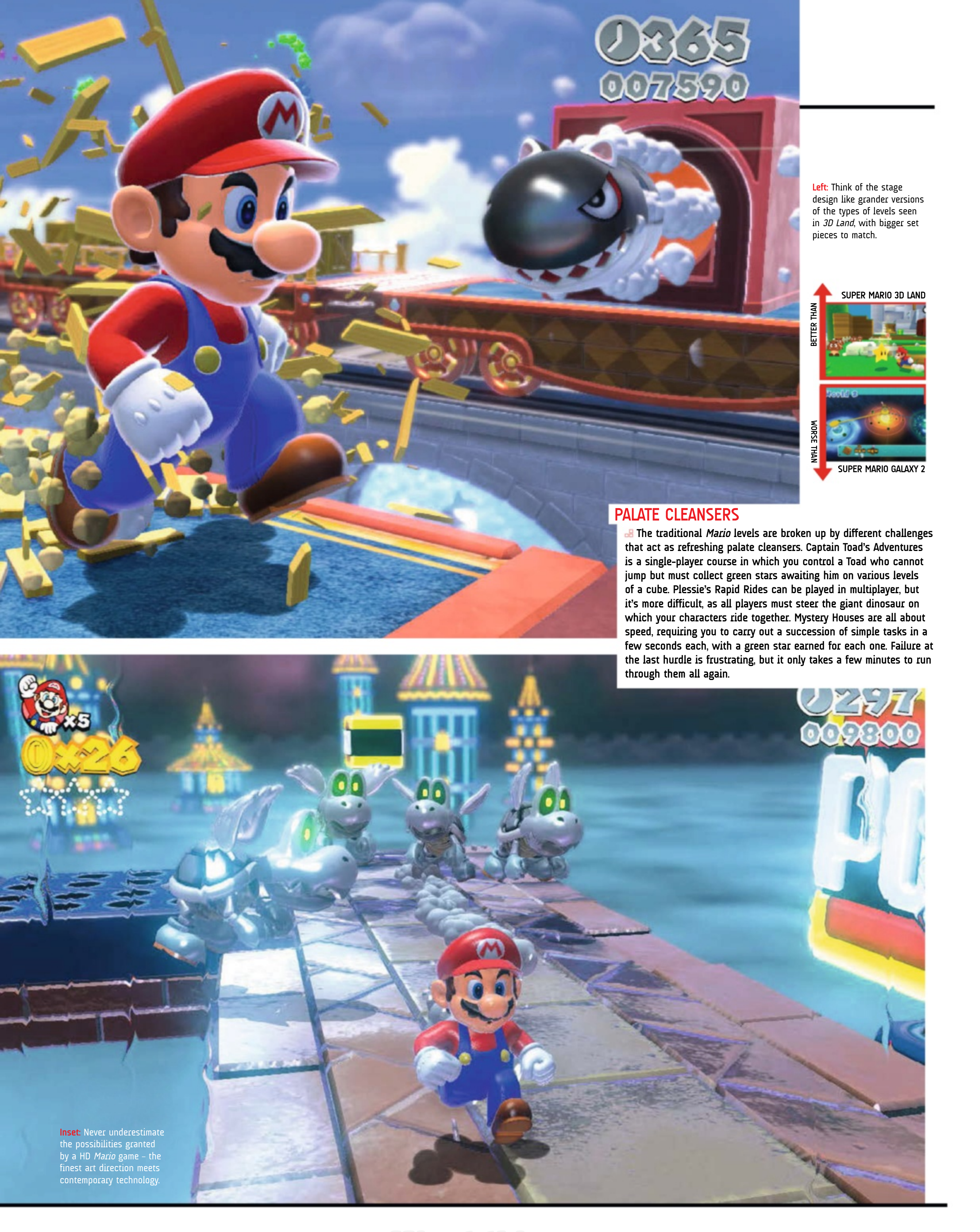
DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Below: You'll spend a lot of time travelling through these see-through pipes, which appear to be the main mode of transport in the Sprixie Kingdom. You retain some control, however, as you choose which path to take in pursuit of coins.



Above: When it comes to bosses, you won't just face the usual suspects. This royal serpent is surrounded by heads that pop out of the ground balancing giant plates that you have to jump on to get to him.



Left: Think of the stage design like grander versions of the types of levels seen in *3D Land*, with bigger set pieces to match.

PALATE CLEANSERS

The traditional *Mario* levels are broken up by different challenges that act as refreshing palate cleansers. Captain Toad's Adventures is a single-player course in which you control a Toad who cannot jump but must collect green stars awaiting him on various levels of a cube. Plessie's Rapid Rides can be played in multiplayer, but it's more difficult, as all players must steer the giant dinosaur on which your characters ride together. Mystery Houses are all about speed, requiring you to carry out a succession of simple tasks in a few seconds each, with a green star earned for each one. Failure at the last hurdle is frustrating, but it only takes a few minutes to run through them all again.

Inset: Never underestimate the possibilities granted by a HD *Mario* game – the finest art direction meets contemporary technology.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

3 MINS

A few minutes after loading up the game you'll likely have finished the first level. You'll probably be a cat, because the game is really keen to show you that.

3 HOURS

Rather than stick to a theme, World 3 features just one snow-themed level, which is made more interesting by the ability to throw snowballs and ride in an ice skate.

3 DAYS

Once you've finished most of the levels and had a bit of a breather, you will probably want to go back and get all those green stars to unlock the final content.

even does as a cat, cutely clawing at the air). Besides, although it seems the game has just swapped one damsel in distress for seven Sprixie princesses, it feels good to play as Peach and imagine that she's taking revenge on Bowser for years of abuse.

While the single-player experience doesn't feel like it's missing much, this is another game clearly designed with multiplayer in mind. The levels often have multiple paths, close enough to minimise the chance of one character falling off the edge of the screen, though all that does is bring them back into play in a bubble they can pop themselves. It might be easier to wander away from the centre of the action than it is in the two-dimensional *Mario* games, but that also means that it's easier to avoid stepping on each other's toes as you compete for the highest score, which nets you a technically useless but visually impressive crown to wear in the next level.

If your friends fail to be swayed by the promise of feline fun and you're forced to play by yourself, another new power-up provides a way to feel less alone. The Double Cherry clones your character on the spot, giving

Below: That Bowser is involved in the story probably won't surprise you too much.

POWER-UPS

New skills in *Super Mario 3D World* means new power-ups. Collecting a bell will activate your cat form, while collecting a double cherry clones your character so they can run amok together through the environment like some kind of platforming Loki. Both ideas are masterfully implemented by Nintendo – no real surprise, of course.



Left: In cat form, Mario and his friends can use their claws to dig into and climb vertical walls, which is a skill useful for things like reaching goodies hidden on the top shelf and for avoiding enemies like Bullet Bills.

Right: Level design is nicely built to accommodate any setup of players you can ask for. As a solitary *Mario* experience, it's still valuable to play.







Left: The sunset casting orange light over the sparse foliage makes Sprawling Savannah one of the most beautiful levels in the game.

Above: When Bowser himself deigns to deal with you, he often does so from the relative safety of a giant car.

you two of them to control, and the effect is addictive if you can find more. However many clones you have, they'll all react the same way to your button presses, which is particularly useful when you can sweep a large group through a bunch of coins to collect them in much less time, but it gets tricky when there's danger about and you want to keep them all out of harm's way. More than some of the other power-ups, the Double Cherry is useful in a variety of situations, like if you need four characters to stand on a platform in order to make it move but you couldn't convince anyone to play with you that day.

Other power-ups are more single-purpose tools, like the Light Block that can dispense with ghosts, or the Goomba Mask that lets you mingle with the enemy. There are quite a few to keep track of, but you can store a backup on the GamePad to be released when needed, though the game seems to prioritise some over others. If you're in Tanooki form, for instance, then releasing a saved cat power-up and trying to pick it up will just send it back to the GamePad. If you're in cat form and you pick up a Fire Flower, you'll transform into a pyromaniac and that little bell will be saved for later.

Besides storage, and general control for player one, the GamePad is also used to occasionally move platforms, some by tapping on them and some by blowing into the microphone. But although it's a blessing in a way that the first player has to use the GamePad to play, since it saves you having to buy an extra Wii Remote, it feels like the game could have used it more. Some might prefer the opposite, that the GamePad was used only as a standard controller, but either way this middle ground makes it feel like these touch-screen features were poked in at the last minute, which seems out of place in such a carefully designed game.

One benefit to this lack of innovation with regards to use of the GamePad is that if you're playing alone it's easy to do so without the TV, since the image on the GamePad screen is almost exactly the same. Apart from the fact that you can't wander too far from your sofa, playing *Super Mario 3D World* in TV-Off Mode almost feels like you're playing on 3DS. It's useful, but for some the ease of that comparison is made will leave them cold. For them, HD graphics and multiplayer are not enough; it's not *Super Mario Galaxy*, and that's all that matters. But take *Super Mario 3D World* for what it is, and not what it isn't, and there's no denying that it's a world class platformer. The levels are as well-designed as you'd expect, introducing the new skills you need so gradually and clearly that you barely realise you're learning, and balanced such that you rarely feel frustrated. The extra space compared to the 2D games can make some levels seem easy, but there are still secrets to be found, and challenges that will require more skill.

If there's anyone out there who's getting into *Mario* for the first time with the Wii U, this is a great example of an alternative kind of game to *New Super Mario Bros. U*. For the rest of us, *Super Mario 3D World* might not be a "game changer" like *Super Mario 64*, but it'll always be remembered as the one that let the cats out.

IT FEELS GOOD TO PLAY AS PEACH AND IMAGINE THAT SHE'S TAKING REVENGE ON BOWSER FOR YEARS OF ABUSE

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

GHOST MIIS: Connect online and ghost Miis will show you where secrets are hidden in the levels.
MIIVERSE: Stamps, which are hidden one in each level, can be used to create Miiverse messages.

FAQs

Q. BEST CONTROLLER TO USE?
3D World is better navigated with an analog stick, so attach a Nunchuk to your Wii Remote or use a Pro Controller.

Q. WHAT'S THE STORY?
A *Mario* plot is hardly relevant. This is only notable because Bowser has kidnapped seven Sprixie princesses instead of Peach.

Q. WHAT IF I HATE CATS?
There's just absolutely nothing we can do about that, unfortunately.

VERDICT 9/10
REMARKABLE 2D-STYLE PLAY IN A BEAUTIFUL 3D WORLD

YOU TAKE THE HYRULE AND I'LL TAKE THE LORULE

The Legend Of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds

Right: Die, and Ravio's winged helper will grab any rented equipment – it's tempting to take more items than you need, but it's all the more painful to see them whisked away. At 800+ rupees each to buy, however, renting is your only option in the early game.

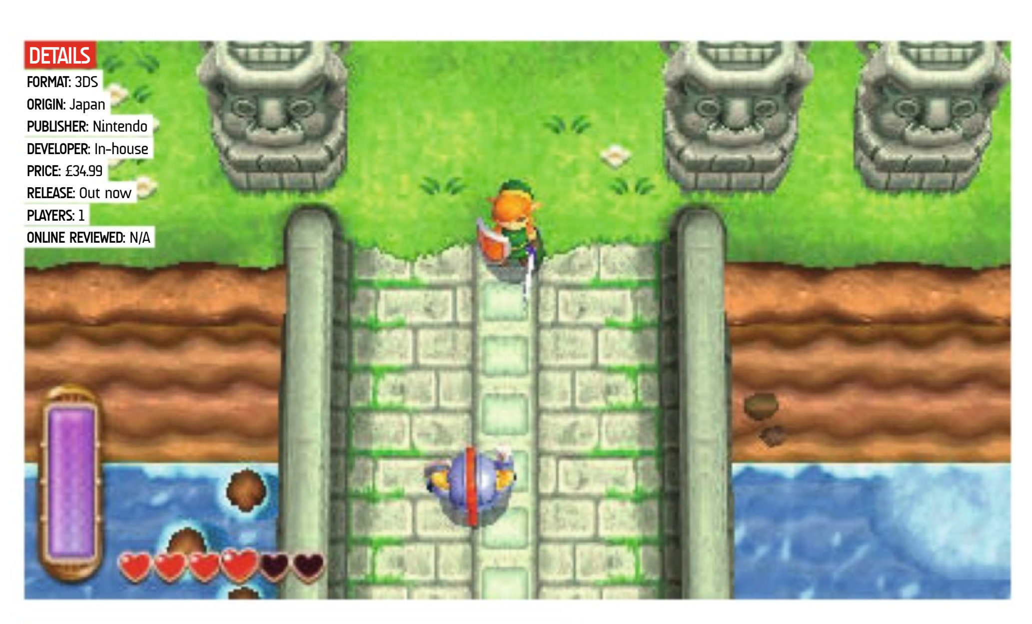
Sequel or remake? In truth, neither description quite fits *A Link Between Worlds*, which puts it at risk of falling between two stools. It's a dangerous position to be in, not least because, by setting its game in the same world the elfin hero explored some 22 years ago, Nintendo invites direct comparison with one of gaming's universally acknowledged greats. And yet perhaps that isn't too different from the norm. *Zelda* games revolve around familiar, iconic routines and rituals, after all: defined as much by what has changed as what has stayed the same.

So we know the drill. Here is another grandiose fairytale, a simple story about a brave hero in green whose destiny is to save the world. *A Link To The Past*'s dark world is now the kingdom of Lorule, the bleak flipside of Link's domain. It's a world ruled by darkness, overrun by monsters and thieves. From here a new villain emerges in the form of Yuga, a powerful magician who turns Hyrule's seven sages into paintings. Link is naturally tasked to put things right, assisted by Hilda, Lorule's *Zelda* equivalent.

What follows is surprising mostly for the way it deviates from the recent *Zelda* norm, throwing out a lot of what we've grown to know – in most cases, love, in others, tolerate – over the years. Eiji Aonuma spoke of the desire to buck the trend towards excessive handholding, but even so some may be startled at how quickly it lets go. This is a world you're expected to discover for yourself. Map markers may highlight your destination, but they won't tell you how to get there.

Now you're allowed to explore the environment freely as long as you have the right equipment – and how you obtain it has also changed. A stranger named Ravio soon inveigles himself into Link's home, setting up shop and loaning out items so you can tackle dungeons in any order. Where recent entries have allowed you to be fairly cavalier in the knowledge that death is but a minor inconvenience, the impermanence of the equipment gives you something to lose when your hearts run out. You can, however, buy gear if you've saved up enough rupees, which in turn encourages you not to skip past enemies but to confront them. Currency has become almost meaningless in *Zelda*; here you're much more likely to spend time foraging for silver and gold rupees, bombing rockfalls over cave entrances, gliding to distant platforms with the hookshot, conjuring bridges of sand to span gaps.

DETAILS
FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Above: The imagery may seem mostly familiar, but the economics of renting in the game represent an enormous sea change for this long-awaited sequel.

THESE LABYRINTHS ARE WONDERFUL: BRISKLY PACED AND DENSE WITH IDEAS, GIMMICKS AND TRICKS

This is a harder-edged *Zelda* than its immediate predecessors, closer to the original in spirit, particularly in the early game where enemies in the field can kill off reckless adventurers all too easily. As dungeons are completed and your heart tally and bottle count increases – with fairies in plentiful supply, death comes less frequently – the challenge levels off a little, though it's telling you'll feel the need to keep a tonic or two handy. Bosses are fast and attack aggressively, and the arenas in which you fight them are cramped. You'll need certain equipment to deal with some guardians, but mostly you'll need little more than your wits and your reactions to finish them off.



The same goes for the dungeons themselves. Stone plinths at the entrances highlight the gear you'll need within, but in many cases, Link's sword and your brain are the only tools required. You'll also make use of Link's newfound ability to merge with walls: here, he transforms into a cave painting, complete with a charmingly rudimentary waddle. Ironically, it's in 2D form that you gain a greater appreciation of 3D space and Nintendo absolutely makes the most of the possibilities, concocting some fiendish environmental puzzles.

And these labyrinths are wonderful: briskly paced and dense with ideas, gimmicks and tricks. A slippery ice dungeon proves a test of nerve as you negotiate narrow spars across multiple floors. Another's liquid puzzles fleetingly nod to *Ocarina Of Time*'s infamous Water Temple, every bit as devious and intelligent yet not nearly so laborious.

OCTOPUS RIFT

The game's biggest sidequest sees you tasked with rescuing the 100 mewling babies of a giant squid-like creature called Mother Maiamai. The critters are scattered across Hyrule and Lorule, again encouraging you to get familiar with your environment. Often you won't be able to see them, though you can locate them from their muffled cry. You'll sprint into trees to shake them loose, hurl aside large rocks to uncover them, or race across walls before bursting out to dislodge them. Some are absolutely deviously hidden, but a special map allows you to see how many are remaining in a given area, and it's a worthwhile detour from the main quest: for each ten you find, Mother Maiamai will upgrade a piece of Link's equipment, and make it "nice".

FAQs

Q. BEST NEW ITEM?
Link's Tornado Rod whips him into the air, and can also be used to stun enemies.

Q. WORST OLD ITEM?
The boomerang. Handy for hitting distant switches, but you'll never actually need it.

Q. ISN'T IT UGLY?
Screens really don't do it justice. Lighting effects and superb 3D bring this top-down Hyrule to life.

Left: You've played enough *Zelda* games to know what to do next by now. Familiarity is part of *Zelda*'s DNA to some extent, and *A Link Between Worlds* finds excellent ways to provoke nostalgic feelings without overdoing it.

Above: In motion, the choice of art direction really makes sense for the series – you'll have to trust us on that. The 3D really accentuates the style Nintendo's designers have gone for here.

Meanwhile, the vertiginous platforming elements are enhanced no end by some expert use of 3D, perhaps the most potent stereoscopic effects yet seen on 3DS. You may never tire of hammering a bounce pad and seeing it flip Link up and out of the screen, as he touches down on a higher floor.

There is, perhaps, a slight feeling of emptiness to Nintendo's brave old world. Most areas are populated with enemies, but outside Kakariko Village and a handful of other oddballs, there aren't too many friendly faces to see. And while this lean game maintains a cracking pace for its 15-hour duration, some will miss the warmth and sustenance a little extra meat can provide, even if its runtime compares favourably with the original.

As a link to Link's past, there's a risk that familiarity with Hyrule and its shadowy reflection could breed contempt. Yet while it might feel fresher to newcomers than to those who explored a similar world during the SNES era, *A Link Between Worlds* stands to resonate even more with that latter audience. Veterans may marvel at the differences, but there's equal – if not greater – delight in using old tricks, in remembering familiar routes. Yet its most striking tie with its forerunner is surely the music, with many old themes remastered in majestic fashion. In a series that has always carried a strong musical heartbeat, it's among the franchise's best soundtracks to date.

A Link Between Worlds is a remake and a sequel, then – both a tribute to a classic and a worthy successor in its own right. For all the changes, it's still recognisably *Zelda*, and a legend this powerful can comfortably bear another retelling.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

MASTER SWORDSMAN: The circle pad makes Link a more efficient combatant than his SNES counterpart, offering smoother and quicker movement in multiple directions. Enemies, however, are every bit as manoeuvrable.

VERDICT 9/10
A MASTERFUL BLEND OF OLD AND NEW



Above: You'll see a few familiar faces in Hyrule. The ties to the past are stronger than in any other *Zelda*, though it's respectful rather than reverential.

MORE THAN JUST A GAME OF CAT AND MOUSE

Need For Speed: Rivals

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, Xbox 360 PS3, PC
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: Ghost
PRICE: £59.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (1-6 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Back when EA split the *Need For Speed* franchise down the middle and made *Shift* the designated simulator branch of the series, it meant the other side could go as arcade-y as it wanted. We saw that ideology materialise in *Hot Pursuit*, strengthen itself in *Most Wanted* and now we're seeing it blossom into the nitrous-filled powerhouse that is *Rivals*.

We played this game on PS4, and it's a marked difference from anything we've played on the 360 or PS3 – it's like a PC game with everything turned up to ultra, and then some. The texture detail is incredible, right down to the jagged edges of broken glass that littered the floor whenever we totalled our car (which wasn't *that* often). The light bounces and refracts as you'd expect in real life – at one point, we were driving through an open desert, and the bruise-coloured light of the setting sun caught our vehicle at such an angle that it made us pull over and just admire the vista. Sunbeams diffused through the swirling dust of the desert, highlighting how dirty our car had gotten in the off-road drive to the American wilderness. This game is an exhibition of the Frostbite 3 engine – a true taste of the graphical fidelity we can expect to see on this new generation.

Ghost knows this, too. When you unlock a new car in your police career (or buy it in your racer career), there will be a jump-cut montage of your new vehicle, showcased alongside pumping, bass-heavy music, neon strip lights flashing on and off in a wind-tunnel somewhere as a camera circles your new toy. It's vehicular pornography – the sort of thing you imagine you might find on Jeremy Clarkson's smartphone. These little snippets are indulgent, even clichéd, but you can forgive Ghost's motives in programming them, because even non-motor enthusiasts will be impressed by the engine powering the visuals.

Once we stopped ogling our car, we took to the open roads of Redview – a condensed America, inspired heavily by Californian coastlines. But the world extends beyond languid beaches and winding roads – there are town sections, mountainous paths and the aforementioned desert, all knitted

Right: The inclusion of pursuit tech compounds the arcade-style feeling of the game; this is a perfect middle-ground between *Forza* and *Driver*.

Below: Different cars suit different play styles. The a Dodge Challenger, for example, has all the grace of a tugboat but is a hardy little beast when it comes to ramming people off the road.



Below: Teaming up with other players to race or bringing down criminals is far more fun than solo play.

SUNBEAMS DIFFUSED THROUGH THE SWIRLING DUST OF THE DESERT, HIGHLIGHTING HOW DIRTY OUR CAR HAD GOTTEN IN THE OFF-ROAD DRIVE TO THE AMERICAN WILDERNESS



ALWAYS TAKE THE WEATHER WITH YOU

It's not just a beautifully rendered world that makes *Rivals* a beautiful place to be – Ghost has included a variety of weather effects in the game to make your driving experience even more diverse. As you'd expect, rain takes resistance off the road and makes controlling your car more difficult, but the aesthetics of other weather cycles are something to behold. At one point, we were driving through a park, the wind picked up and we found ourselves gliding through a petal blizzard. There's also a day/night rotation, showing off the two sides of Redview with aplomb; at night, the lights of the towns viewable from the mountains are nothing short of captivating.



Left: The roads built around different environmental zones are inspired by real-life race spots – this mountain area is reminiscent of Ghost's Gothenburg homeland, for example.

together in a map that feels authentic and vibrant. This sense of life is galvanised by the inclusion of the AllDrive feature – an online system that will pair you up with drivers from your Live or PSN friend list by default. Their inclusion in your game can be minimal – other players can passively populate your world and do their own thing, or you can team up with them on the fly to initiate a race, or work together to take down other racers. Everything in the game can be done in co-op, with bonus points awarded for playing with more people.

It's this feature that showed off how *fun* the game can be. When we played online, we were playing as the only cop on a server full of racers – three of whom chose to initiate their own head-to-head race when we left our garage. With a quick tap of L1, we started up our sirens and lights and began pursuing them. At the time, our cop car (an Aston Martin One-77) out-powered most of the other racers, and we had little trouble stalking along the roads and powering up our pursuit tech to tactically eliminate the speeders from the race, one car at a time.

Pursuit tech is an upgradable weapons system that's vital to either defend yourself from pursuers or take out opposing vehicles. With options ranging from EMPs to electo-static fields, turbo boosts to roadblocks, the tech throws in an element of tactical gameplay to the races – with a limited amount of ammo, you must consider whether or not you want to risk missing a car that seems adept at dodging your advances whilst also fighting against the clock to take them out as quickly as possible. Cops and racers have access to different tech, so the cat-and-mouse dynamic is beautifully balanced.

Our server eventually wrangled itself to three cops vs. three racers, and we all engaged in a hectic Hot Pursuit through an agricultural area and into the snow-capped mountains. It was frenetic, six cars clipping each others' bumpers and firing up their tech in a desperate bid to outrun the others. At one point, we ran out of 'ammo' and resorted to burning through our nitrous boosts to get ahead of the competition before slamming on our handbrakes, sacrificing our own chassis to impede the progress of another racer.

The dual dynamic of being able to progress as either a cop or street racer at the same time prevents the game from ever becoming too stale. Despite the multitude of game modes, though, you're effectively always doing the same thing, no matter how it's dressed up: you're either racing, being chased or pursuing. The tasks available to you becoming increasingly more challenging, and the placement of objectives and checkpoints guides you through Redview County, showing off its incredible vistas, varied landmarks and diverse road surfaces. But it still doesn't detract from the somewhat disappointing lack of diversity in game modes.

To be honest, we spent the majority of our time just cruising around the county, drooling over the views and picking off random racers that happened across our patrols, and got a good deal of enjoyment out of that. *Need For Speed: Rivals* had Marcus Nilsson as an executive producer – who's previously worked with EA and DICE on the *Battlefield* franchise. It's clear his philosophy for online gaming has carried over to *Need For Speed* – though there is an option for solo play, this game is a far better entity when you've got friends on the server. That's what it was made for, and that's where it excels.

FAQs

Q. ARE THERE FERRARIS IN IT?
Yes; the iconic cars are unlocked at Rank 10 for both racers and cops (ever seen a *real* cop driving a Ferrari, though?).

Q. CAN I CUSTOMISE MY CAR?
Yes – while cop cars are non-customisable, racers can pretty much do what they like to their vehicles.

Q. CAN I GET OUT OF THE CAR?
No, unfortunately not. But the world is so vast that it'd take you forever to get anywhere on foot anyway.

BETTER THAN

NEED FOR SPEED: THE RUN



WORSE THAN



FORZA MOTORSPORT 4

CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

WATCH OVER ME: An Android, PC and iOS app, OverWatch, shows you the world map, populated with anyone on your server. You can use the app to grant buffs or penalties to other racers.

VERDICT 8/10

PROOF THAT NEED FOR SPEED IS THE DEFINITIVE ARCADE RACER



Above: It's not just New York that's been recreated in Lego's plastic wonder – the mystical realm of Asgard is resplendent in its extravagant reimagining. There's a certain charm that comes with seeing your favourite Marvel haunts depicted in plastic blocks.

DO I LOOK TO BE IN A GAMING MOOD?

Lego Marvel Super Heroes

"I'm still hungry," bellows Galactus, "find me something else to eat!" With a brisk nod, the Silver Surfer jets off into the wider cosmos, inevitably landing on Earth. Iron Man tracks him, suit up to full power, chasing the celestial surfer dude down. "Iron Man, I'm reading an incoming ship," warns Nick Fury before Dr. Doom blasts Surfer out of the sky, shattering his board into an array of magically charged cosmic bricks.

And so it begins. Enter all the most notable villains of the extended Marvel universe, brought together under Doom's leadership to collect these mysterious cosmic bricks with the intent of… well, who knows? In true Marvel fashion, nothing is as it seems on the surface, and beyond the obvious lies a plot that could not only risk the Lego Earth… but the Lego Nine Realms as well. It's fan service, obviously, but executed wonderfully.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: Multi
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER: TT Games
PRICE: £32
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

TT Games has always been renowned for its attention to detail – its respect for the licences it works with is obvious to anyone that plays the extensive games that make up the TT library. Marvel is no different – in fact, with such rich and diverse source material to draw from, the game actually feels like it's managing to knit together the Marvel cinematic universe and the comic universe in a deft and valid way. Where the movies are limited by convoluted screen-rights contracting, the game world that TT creates is packed with anything and everything Marvel – the Fantastic Four, the Guardians of the Galaxy, the X-Men, the Avengers, characters from the Spidey-verse – they're all in there. The well known iconic heroes and villains stand shoulder-to-shoulder with lesser-known characters, creating a 100+ character playable roster that emphasises how far Marvel has come in its 60+ years.

THE GAME PLAYFULLY PRODS AT THE RIDICULOUSNESS THAT IS SUPERHERO CULTURE, BUT IT DOES SO IN A RESPECTFUL AND KNOWING WAY

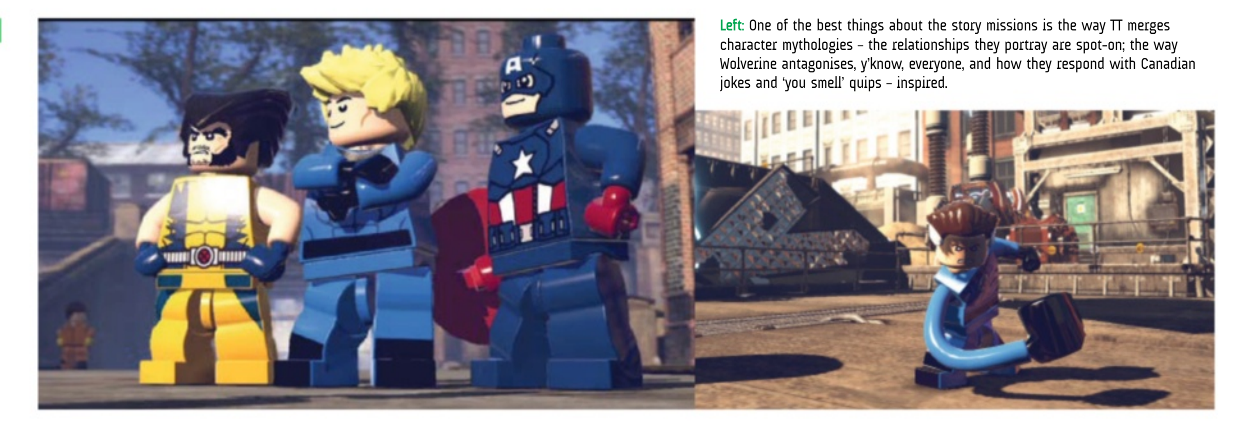
The game plays as you'd expect from a *Lego* title – it's bare-bones platforming done well; face buttons allow jumping, attacking, switching between characters/transforming (more on that later) and character-specific powers; Hulk will tear up the earth, Iron Man will charge his Uni-beam and Spidey will activate his Spider Senses, for example. As is now the *Lego* custom, TT introduces these characters one by one, teaching you what they can do and how they can do it. The levels will then merge these lessons together and

FAQs

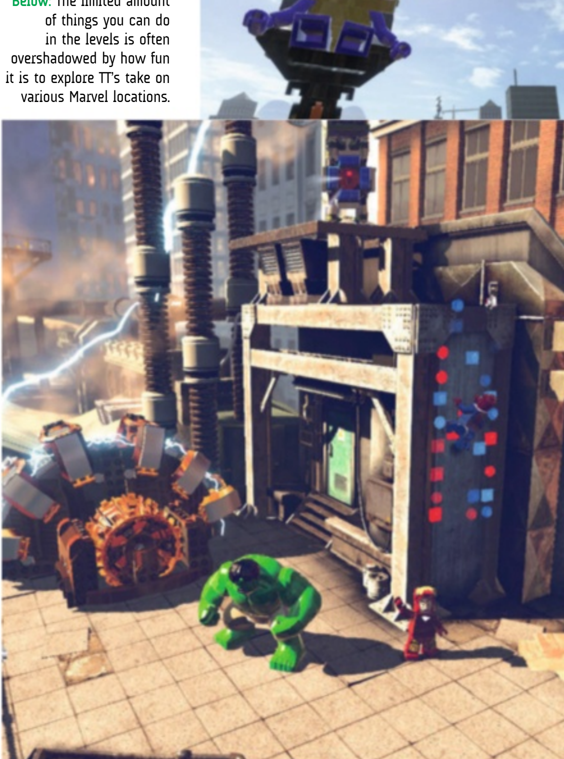
Q. CAN I PLAY AS SQUIRREL GIRL?
Yes, oddly enough. The roster of characters is pretty comprehensive – even minor characters are featured.

Q. CAN I DRIVE AROUND?
Yes – it wouldn't be a true open-world New York without angry drivers giving up their cars for superheroes to use...

Q. CAN I RECREATE ICONIC SCENES?
Feel free – we've heard of people unlocking Gwen Stacy and diving off Brooklyn Bridge, as an example of what you can do.



Left: One of the best things about the story missions is the way TT merges character mythologies – the relationships they portray are spot-on; the way Wolverine antagonises, y'know, everyone, and how they respond with Canadian jokes and 'you smell' quips – inspired.



Right: It's not just heroes, but villains throughout Marvel mythology battling it out.

Below: The limited amount of things you can do in the levels is often overshadowed by how fun it is to explore TT's take on various Marvel locations.

leave you to figure out how to get from A to B. If it all sounds fairly simple, that's because it is – but therein lies the charm. There are only a certain amount of powers: classified into fire, telekinetic, electric and so on, but each character's array of abilities is different, so forming your team to have the widest ranging or most relevant powers adds a little more depth to the game.

Lego Marvel Super Heroes takes what TT did with *DC Super Heroes* and builds on it – the open world of Manhattan acts like a hub in-between main story missions, brimming with collectable characters, extra bricks and people to talk to. There are additional puzzles and challenges throughout Manhattan to get engaged with and for the most part, it boils down to a matter of clocking what needs doing and, well, doing it. Gamers won't find anything particularly captivating or revolutionary in TT's block-based New York, but it's the appeal of having a sandbox environment in which to create your ideal Marvel team (our favourites were Nova, Moon Knight, Union Jack and Venom) that really resonates with us. It sounds paltry, but when you can mix and match so notable names from different Marvel properties, you don't really *need* that to be stimulated by the open world level design.

The actual story missions themselves are different, though – they feel far more robust in their design, and are effectively chases through some of the most noteworthy Marvel domains – from the X-Mansion to the SHIELD helicarrier, the Rainbow Bridge of Asgard to Latveria, the extensive Marvel realm is brought forth in all its Lego glory. Being a TT game, of course everything is infused with a very British and satirical sense of humour – the game playfully prods at the ridiculousness that is superhero culture, but it does so in a respectful and knowing way.

"Man, that is one cheesy costume," says a passer-by in New York when you're running around as Cap. It's all very tongue in cheek.

It's a shame the game suffers from some technical setbacks, then – frame-rate issues, screen tearing and occasional brick pop-in overshadow what is an otherwise excellent looking game. The engine running the game is impressive, though; the first level sees you going toe-to-toe with Sandman, and here TT shows off just how many bricks it can render at once, with Sandman's artificial limbs drawing in hundreds of pieces of Lego. It's a great welcome to the game; it's TT showcasing exactly what its new engine is capable of.

While *Lego Marvel Super Heroes* may not have the finesse of some of the other open-world games that have launched this year, what it lacks for in depth it makes up for in longevity. Our campaign lasted about 15 hours, but the title awakens our latent completionist – we found ourselves revisiting levels with different characters, keen to unlock/collect *everything* the game has to offer. It never feels like a grind, either – the world is so attentively built that every character has something to say at some point, every piece of ambient dialogue feels like something you need to hear, every minor quest feels important in the grander scheme of things.

This may be a game aimed at a younger audience, but once again TT proves that the membrane separating core and casual games is permeable, and that under the right circumstances, its possible to make a game as appealing to the hardcore adult audience as it is to children.

CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

DUET TOGETHER: As with most *Lego* games, it's much more entertaining when played together with someone else; it's where the game excels.

ACHIEVEMENTS ASSEMBLED

The knowing humour of the title extends beyond a few quips made during in-game dialogue – the Achievement/Trophy list is a nod to Marvel film and comics that touches on even the most minor of points. Our personal favourite is the Don't I Know You? Achievement which is unlocked by playing as Cap and Human Torch together; a nice prod at Chris Evans' dual superhero roles. There's also Puny God – awarded for getting Hulk to slam Loki into the ground. It's this attention to detail that really makes *Lego Marvel Super Heroes* feel like the Marvel game we've been waiting for.

BETTER THAN: MARVEL HEROES



WORSE THAN: MARVEL VS CAPCOM 3

VERDICT 7/10
A LOVE LETTER TO MARVEL, ONLY HELD BACK BY SIMPLICITY

CONSTANTS AND VARIABLES

BioShock Infinite: Burial At Sea, Episode 1

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360, PS3
ORIGIN: America
PUBLISHER: 2K Games
DEVELOPER: Irrational Games
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

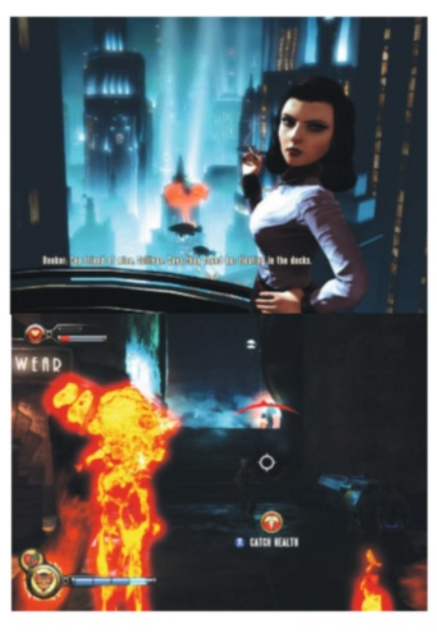
Remember when you woke up from that plane crash and found yourself choking on the cold waters of the Atlantic ocean? You frantically swam for the surface, gasping for air, clocking an edifice-cum-lighthouse in the mid-distance. Survival instinct kicked in, and you made for the structure. Inside, the first sight that greeted you was a glorious bronze bust of a proud man, leaning over you to proclaim in regal red and gold; 'No Gods or Kings. Only Man.'

So the tone of *BioShock* was set; as was the world of Rapture established. As you explored the rusting, buckling skeleton of a great city that was – as you uncovered Art Deco dance halls, rotting gardens, flooded accommodations – you couldn't shake the feeling that this Darwinian dystopia had such grand potential; that this mysterious ruin was once a nirvana for the world's elite, a garden of Eden for those held back by a society that didn't understand them. Booker DeWitt is a perfect fit in the world of Rapture, then. Pursued by demons of his own making that he doesn't fully understand, the submerged city offers itself as a fitting destination for a man with an almost sociopathic determination to get the job done, no matter what obstacle lies before him. His presence there is initially a mystery, but – as you'd expect from *BioShock* – the pieces of the puzzle eventually fall into place. We were cautious that Levine and his team were revisiting Rapture – it seemed like its story was done; neatly sewn up, closure given, with nothing left to offer. How wrong we were.

Exploring the city again – this time in its entire vibrant, vivacious colour – was like a hit of Adam into a long-healed vein. Right away, we were captivated – keen to explore this gorgeous, aspirational world, keen to examine the dirt under the fingernails of a city whose walls would soon come crashing down around us. You walk around the softly-lit glass-walled arcadia with a loaded sense

Right: Elizabeth suits the noir look perfectly, and if *Burial At Sea* is inspired by Fifties crime dramas, then she plays her role all too well…

Below: *Infinite*'s lighting engine really does Rapture justice; the way the light diffuses through the water is really rather impressive.



Below: Booker and Elizabeth find themselves in a prison-come-apartment store, where it's easy to see Rapture hasn't lost any of its intrinsic creepiness.

Below: There are some old faces making reappearances in *Burial At Sea*, and seeing them before their fall loads a satisfying level of closure to their ultimate, over-arching storyline.





Above: Rapture has been rebuilt from the ground up in a new engine, and given a more open-plan level design than previous titles. This gives you the opportunity to explore at your own pace.

EXPLORING THE CITY AGAIN – THIS TIME IN ITS ENTIRE VIBRANT, VIVACIOUS COLOUR – WAS LIKE A HIT OF ADAM INTO A LONG-HEALED VEIN

KEEP AN EAR TO THE GROUND

In true *BioShock* style, the game is littered with collectable audiotapes and secret areas, requiring lock-picks and a lot of sniffing around to uncover. Played straight, the DLC can be completed in about two hours, but if you dedicate yourself to seeking out all the secrets and surprises, you can expect to sink about four-to-five hours into the chapter. As you'd expect, each audiotape provides a unique window into the lives of Rapture's inhabitants, showing a world on the edge – documenting the first people to get addicted to splicing, offering hints about Elizabeth's impact on the city and providing context to wider Rapture. Through personal tapes, the objectivist philosophy is once again compounded; an argument examined in a clear-eyed and eloquent manner.

of poetic irony; you – and only you – know that this city is doomed. The populace of Rapture are the best and brightest innovators and pioneers in the world, relocated to the submerged society to build a city that only they deserve. It's all laden with a grim irony, though; all the talk the citizens offer of their future is worthless – each and every one of them will end up a crazed Splicer, haunting Rapture's barren, leaking streets hungering for one last, desperate fix of the Adam they've come to rely on.

This tension is maintained throughout the chapter, compounded with subtle nods back to the first game. The aforementioned banner – 'No Gods or Kings. Only Man' – is right there when you step out of DeWitt's PI office, replete with Ryan's icon, smack in the middle of the best vista the game has to offer. It's a subtle message from Irrational – 'Welcome home,' they're saying. And what a welcome it is – *BioShock* hasn't aged too badly thanks to its bespoke art direction, but rebuilding Rapture on *Infinite*'s engine *works*. If we were going back down into the watery depths of hell that was post-Fall Rapture, then maybe *Infinite*'s engine wouldn't have done it justice, but the first half of the demo – set in the energetic, pedestrianised marketplace – is resonant with life, colour, light and personality. You're free to roam this area, and we found ourselves sidling up to conversations, just to eavesdrop.

From fairly early on, it's obvious Elizabeth is a tourist in Rapture – where everyone else sees the pallid, transmogrifying faces of the Little Sisters as a utilitarian way of furthering the human race, Elizabeth sees victims of monstrous abuse. "This is a world that values children, not childhood" she remarks at one point, taking a drag from a cigarette and staring out at the neon-stripped expanses of Rapture proper. Elizabeth may be a visitor, new to Rapture's moral coda, but she's every part the femme fatale this world accommodates.

This is still the Elizabeth from *Infinite*, and Booker's Columbian pragmatism has evidently rubbed off on her. Part of *Chapter One* has Elizabeth distracting shopkeepers while you slink off in search of a quest item. The different manners in which she plays the vendors is inspired, another remarkable example of Irrational's attention to characterisation and storytelling.

The DLC is let down only by its mechanics – the reintroduction of the original's weapon wheels is a nice touch, but it still feels like *Infinite*, just with an extra interface to play with. Shock Jockey, Possession and Devil's Kiss make a return, alongside the new Old Man Winter plasmid, and they behave identically to vigors, with Eve replacing Salts. The aesthetic shift to pre-*Infinite* wheels is all well and good, but it just serves to remind you how dialled down the combat has become since then; we miss being able to plan out our attacks – hacking into turrets, stealthing around setting up traps, voyeuristically spying on our quarry with the research camera. It's not that it feels wrong being in Rapture without all this, it's just distinctly different.

The first narrative addition to the *BioShock Infinite* delivers everything it promised – it's an affectionately crafted homage to the first game. Retroactively building on the grim story and Ayn Rand-ian themes, galvanising them with a fresh perspective whilst simultaneously tying Rapture more wholly into the Columbian narrative; it's intelligent, indulgent and nostalgic in equal measure.

FAQs

Q. WILL I RECOGNISE ANYWHERE IN RAPTURE?
Yes; there are some great references to old haunts and locations re-rendered, too.

Q. IS BOOKER AS UNGRACEFUL AS EVER?
Yes, Booker still unceremoniously smashes his fist against elevator buttons in a powerful display of uber-masculinity, or something.

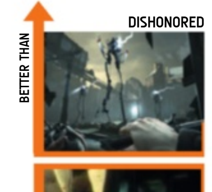
Q. DO I PLAY AS ELIZABETH?
Not yet – that's coming in *Burial At Sea, Episode 2*, and we're very excited to see how Irrational wrangles that gameplay.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

CONSTANTS AND VARIABLES Bringing Columbia and Rapture together sees an interesting repetition of mechanics that even Elizabeth notices in some beautifully self-aware dialogue.

BETTER THAN

DISHONORED





BIOSHOCK

WORSE THAN



VERDICT 9/10

A PHENOMENAL TRIBUTE TO THE BIOSHOCK LEGACY

ENEMY WITHIN EXPANDS FIRAXIS' GAME OF TOY SOLDIERS IN NEW AND EXCITING WAYS

XCOM: Enemy Within

It would have been easy for *Enemy Within* to be a bad game. The *XCOM* series is about a handful of fragile humans holding the line against an unimaginable alien threat, not giant mech men punching transhuman cultists to death. Yet somehow, it all works. The new toys fit in seamlessly with what came before, changing the game for the better.

The mechs are the best example. They've got three times the health of a regular soldier, but can't take cover of any kind. The result is a unit that can reliably take on even the toughest alien head to head, but will die rapidly if caught in a crossfire. They're much like the SHIVs from *Enemy Unknown*, only with all the customisation and character that comes from being a big stompy cyberman, rather than a disposable robot. They're also adept at the classic *XCOM* strategy of terrain destruction, capable of punching straight through walls to make a new entrance for their squadmates.

The other big new toy, gene splicing, is a little less impressive. Giving your soldiers chameleon skin and super strong legs sounds fun to play with, and it is, but all you're really doing is saving yourself the cost of a suit of Ghost Armour, which does exactly the same thing. Far too many of the gene bonuses are simple statistical upgrades or things we've seen before. They're incredibly useful, but they won't change your tactics at a base level the way a mech can.

What will change things is the brand new enemy: Exalt are alien sympathisers, and work like an off-brand version of *XCOM*. They have the same equipment and soldiers you do, just slightly worse. Their armour is poor and their guns seem to constantly need reloading, but they come in large numbers and a lucky rocket from an Exalt heavy can mean a swift trip to the famous memorial wall, complete with sad bagpipe music.

Outside of combat Exalt stir up trouble. They steal your cash, stall your research and generally make a massive nuisance of themselves. It's a nice counterbalance to the fact that the new toys are so easy to access. You can have mechs long before you get laser rifles, but doing so will leave you short on cash for satellites, making countries far more vulnerable to Exalt influence. Nations are far more likely to pull funding than in *Enemy Unknown*, and you'll have to play a cautious game to keep them all.

These are just the greatest hits. There are also new gadgets, enemies, grenades, maps and missions, including one particularly fantastic one involving a whale. It's like getting a new set of Lego: the new toys are nice enough by themselves, but the real pleasure is in how well it slots in with your existing collection, creating a play set with infinite possibilities.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360, PS3
ORIGIN: United States
PUBLISHER: 2k Games
DEVELOPER: Firaxis
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2 (online multiplayer)
MIN SPEC: OS: Windows Vista or later. Processor: 2 GHz Dual Core (Core 2 Duo 2.4 GHz or Athlon X2 2.7 GHz) CPU. Memory: 2 GB RAM. Graphics: 256 MB Video Memory NVIDIA GeForce 8600 GT / ATI Radeon HD 2600 XT or greater. Hard Drive: 20 GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN

THE BUREAU: XCOM DECLASSIFIED





STARCRAFT 2

WORSE THAN

Below: Many new parts have been added to the soldier customisation options. Including hats. A lot of hats.



ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

THAT LITTLE BIT EXTRA: *Enemy Within* is a worthy add-on pack, and far exceeds the value of what you'd typically get from a DLC pack. Value is on its side – this is no throwaway aside.

VERDICT 9/10

WITH ENEMY WITHIN, FIRAXIS HAS MADE XCOM ITS OWN



Above: Sectoids have their own mechs, nicknamed mechtoids. Engaging in a punch-up with one results in this spectacular display.



Below: Score Attack is a mode reminiscent of old *Guitar Hero* games – aim for the highest scores in certain sections of songs for bragging rights over your friends. We're just glad there's no DragonForce…





LORD OF THE STRINGS

Rocksmith 2014 Edition

Remember that South Park episode where the kids get obsessed with *Guitar Hero* and Randy Marsh can't comprehend why Stan and co would rather clack away on a plastic peripheral than actually sit and learn guitar? *Rocksmith* seems like a direct response to that episode – boldly proclaiming the game is "the fastest way to learn guitar" straight up front on the box.

And it probably is. This reviewer has been playing guitar for about eight years now, on a completely hobbyist level, and since we're not particularly adept at learning songs by ear, we tend to gravitate towards PC software like Guitar Pro or PowerTab when we want to pick up a new song. *Rocksmith* does away with the archaic interfaces of tablature software, though, replacing it with something far more intuitive and engaging. For those familiar with *Rock Band* or *Guitar Hero*, the scrolling screens remain, although instead of coloured button symbols, fret numbers and strings are displayed. Reading music this way takes a little getting used to, but once you've cracked the fairly shallow learning curve, you can play along to the 50+ notated songs fairly easily.

The *2014 Edition* introduces Session Mode – an easy-going jam area where you can just lay down some chords or a particularly catchy riff you come up with and create a band to support you. It's surprisingly intuitive – if you set the scale you want to play in, the AI players will listen, learn the tempo of what you're playing and start laying down supporting tracks. The backing instruments are varied, too – there are a multitude of preset bands, and between your support and a tone effect of your own design, you can create pretty much any kind of jam ambience you like.

The Guitarcade of previous versions makes a reappearance too, this time with new and updated mini-games that aid in the technical side of playing – from Ducks Redux (a *Space Invaders*-inspired fret-learning exercise) to Return to Castle Chordead (an FPS controlled by strumming chords), the mini-games are genuinely helpful in learning the basic facets of guitar-playing that form the foundations of any full song.

There are some issues with guitar latency if you play your instrument straight through your TV, and the native setlist isn't as comprehensive in its selection as previous titles (although the option to import old songs exists), but *Rocksmith 2014* is a solid educational tool.

We refuse to classify it as a game. As much as it taps into the completionist in us – we'd never have thought we'd be saying 'We need to 100% this riff to get that achievement' – this is aesthetically pleasing software that probably is the quickest way to learn guitar. We learnt *Paint It Black* note-for-note in about an hour this morning; that definitely wouldn't have happened without *Rocksmith*.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, PC, Mac
ORIGIN: America
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft San Francisco
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

GUITAR HERO: GREATEST HITS





ROCK BAND

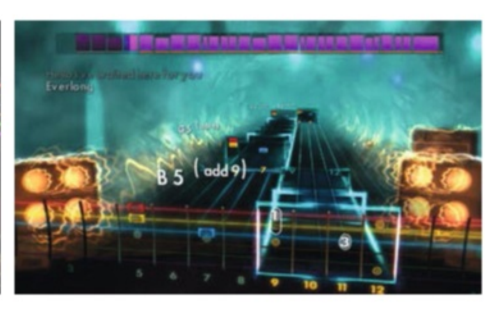
WORSE THAN

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

UP TO 11: The ability to manually change difficulty is a welcome plus; our best tactic was to put a song straight on 100% speed and 100% difficulty, throw ourselves in at the deep end, and play.







VERDICT 8/10

WORTHWHILE FOR ASPIRING AND VETERAN PLAYERS ALIKE



Left: A fittingly moody soundtrack complements the strong visual style, while lead Bigby Wolf speaks in an irresistible throaty growl. The rest of the cast mostly fares well, though there are some questionable accents to get past.

ONCE UPON A TIME IN NEW YORK CITY...

The Wolf Among Us, Episode 1: Faith

You can tell *The Wolf Among Us* is a noir from its shadows. Painted in the thickest, darkest ink, they're one half of a striking, surreal aesthetic that seems to take its cues from the neon-coated purgatory of Nicolas Winding Refn's divisive revenge drama *Only God Forgives.*

And make no mistake – this, too, is a hell. There's no happily ever after for these fairytale favourites: everyone from Snow White to Beauty and the Beast is now settled in Fabletown, a community for former storybook legends, forced to live mundane lives in downtown New York. Using spells known as Glamours, they can adopt human form to avoid detection, and now many are struggling with very human issues, from relationship woes to the need to make ends meet. Attempting to keep the peace among this dysfunctional micro-society is sheriff Bigby Wolf, a chain-smoking, hard-drinking anti-hero straight out of the noir handbook.

After a crunching brawl in the prologue, the first episode of this comic book adaptation sees the big, bad, only partially reformed protagonist plunged into a murder mystery. It's an assured start, too. There's strong – if occasionally overly profane – writing, confident pacing, solid voice acting and a rich atmosphere. One bar scene bristles with tension before exploding into violence, though as before, the action sequences aren't the developer's strong suit.

Halting stutters and input lag almost ruin the otherwise thrillingly directed scenes, and even kill the pacing in a couple of quieter moments. After so many complaints about *The Walking Dead*'s technical issues, you'd hope Telltale would have taken care to avoid them – not to mention improving its rather clumsy user interface.

If it may be time to refine the game engine, perhaps, the studio's craft is more than evident elsewhere. The art direction is stunning, and though the use of static camera angles has its limitations, Fabletown is expertly shot, lit and detailed. The first episode rattles through a sizeable cast, and though some of them are thinly sketched, the majority are memorable. It's still jarring to see text prompts point out where your choices are being noted – which has the side effect of making it evident when the game isn't listening – but the idea of the narrative adjusting to your decisions still carries a certain frisson.

And while the dialogue is occasionally a little on-the-nose ("We need to find out who did this," says one character while investigating a crime scene, to which the only reasonable response is surely "No shit, Sherlock") this is otherwise a dark, twisted delight. We're already anticipating the next chapter in this fantastical fable.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3, PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Telltale Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £3.39
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: BACK TO THE FUTURE



WORSE THAN: THE WALKING DEAD

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING: The art is superb, but while Telltale's game engine huffs and puffs, it's a long way from blowing our house down. Surely it's time for more solid and reliable foundations?

VERDICT 7/10

A FINE FIRST CHAPTER IN A BRUTAL, SATISFYING NOIR





Right: Though the choices don't initially seem to carry the same weight as *The Walking Dead*'s dilemmas, there's one that could well have long-term ramifications. As it's essentially a detective story, you'll even get to finger a suspect for the episode's biggest crime.

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MIXING IT UP TO CREATE AWESOME HYBRID HEROES

Skylanders Swap Force

The fact *Skylanders* still manages to provide enjoyment for all ages is credit to the game's polish. It'd be easy to cast cynicism over Activision's figurines, but the game's quality sweeps those criticisms away with a colourful brush, replacing any misjudged accusations of sinister agenda with fun and optimism.

The fun is still an integral cog in the *Skylanders* clockwork, and *Swap Force* does a great job of continuing the pre-existing formula while expanding with new additions. It's likely you've chosen your favourite *Skylanders* figurines by now, and the game lets you play as characters from your existing collection, while also expanding the roster. These awesome new Swap figurines pop together magnetically at the waist, and you're then able to mix-and-match on the fly, combining elemental abilities that allows access to hidden areas.

Each Swap character is upgraded in two halves, so you can go through the game upgrading two elemental abilities simultaneously. We played with Wash Buckler – a Davy Jones-style octopus with a deadly cutlass – and Blast Zone, who looks like a flaming medieval knight. There are 256 possible permutations, so it'll take a dedicated, deep-pocketed player to see every combination.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: Wii, Wii U, Nintendo 3DS, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox One
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Vicarious Visions
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

DISNEY INFINITY



AS GOOD AS



SKYLANDERS GIANTS



Above: It may not have a great deal of hardcore credibility, but the *Skylanders* series is far from just being a kid-friendly casual-only affair. It's a solid *Diablo*-alike that improves with each entry.

Like previous games, you can complete the main quest without buying dozens of toys, but while there's room for potential criticism, Swap Force makes extra purchases a compelling proposition. This is a deep, lengthy adventure with great level design, excellent pacing and tons of room for replay. On top of that, the content you unlock with extra Skylanders is actually worthwhile. There are hundreds of upgrades, power-ups, secrets and treasures to find. The only flaw is that there never seems to be a real reason for the appearance of the Swap characters, and their place in this world is never really qualified by the game's mechanics in the same way the behemoths were in *Skylanders Giants*.

The addition of a jump button means that the level design is less restrictive and you can explore more freely. It's a shame that the camera is still automatic, especially as the world is so beautiful and varied, but it does a great job of staying out of your way. Combat is deep enough that it provides satisfaction, without being too complex that it'll throw kids off, and there's a strong grasp of difficulty balancing – ranging from easy to genuinely tough, depending on your preference. The new Portal Master Rank also gives you your own personal player rank, which determines what you can get and how many powers you can activate at once. It makes co-op more competitive, and playing with others – especially younger players – is still the best part.

Even with the monetary aspect of purchasing new *Skylanders*, *Swap Force* is the best game in the series. It's a respectful sequel that doesn't look to exploit, but reward players who want to look beyond every shiny door.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

MIX'N'MATCH: Mixing Skylanders' elemental abilities isn't just fun, it also makes for more interesting secrets behind doors that require special abilities like Teleport to access.

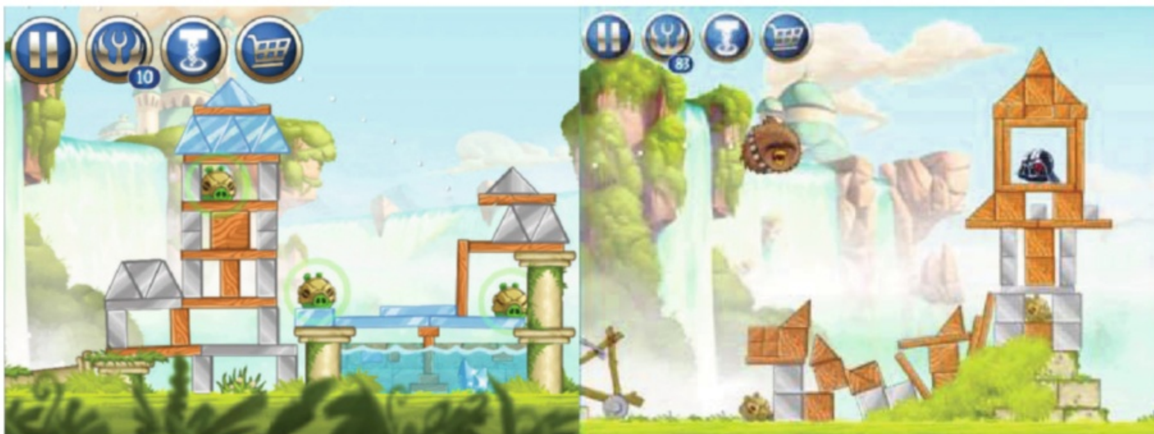
VERDICT 7/10

SWAP FORCE IS THE BEST SKYLANDERS GAME YET

Below: Here we've combined Magna Charge's buzzing torso with Wash Buckler's sucky suckers, which allow us to ascend vertical surfaces to obtain out-of-reach treasures. Levelling up each half separately results in seriously powerful characters.







Left: The designs of the characters are still oddly quite pretty despite their tenuous visual compatibility with *Star Wars*.





Right: If you were expecting a radically different look from the last *Angry Birds*, you came to the wrong franchise.

A NO WING SITUATION

Angry Birds Star Wars II

A prevalent train of thought suggests that there is no commonality between *Angry Birds* and *Star Wars*, and that their marriage is thematically mystifying. Take a step back from your Tatooine bed spread, though, and *Angry Birds* and *Star Wars* have rather a lot in common – both are now so big that their names alone will shift massive numbers of any given videogame.

With this second instalment of *Angry Birds Star Wars*, the throwaway fun of the first game is sadly lost due to the prevalence of microtransactions. Yes, the game itself is only 69p, but there are credit stacks that price up to £69.99, the kind of in-app content that doesn't really agree with us.

Nothing wrong with capitalism – we're in the business of videogames after all, and the burden to spend responsibly only falls on the player – but when it gets in the way of gameplay, it's hard to let it pass. *Angry Birds Star Wars II* is a better game than its predecessor thanks to myriad new characters and ways to knock down towers. Compared, however, to its forebear, the original *Angry Birds*, it feels like design by process – these levels exist not to challenge or test, they are just there because they have to be.

Saying that, the game's still fun, and you can get reasonably far without having to buy extra characters if you're prepared to stick with a few basic birds (Lightsaber one, Jedi push one). Don't expect elaborately designed structures, though. The sheer volume of characters that are potentially available means each level quite simply cannot be designed as a puzzle – there are too many ways to shatter towers, too many options.

There doesn't need to be, either. *Angry Birds* isn't really a videogame any more, it's a toy for kids and mobile gamers. There's little doubt that young fans of the plucky beakers and *Star Wars* itself will lose hours happily knocking down towers and popping Stormtrooper Piggies.

As game critics, it's a shame to see a series that hit its creative zenith with the rather impressive *Angry Birds Space* entirely commit to being nothing more than a product, but it's hard to fault Rovio when the fundamentals remain very addictive, and the attention to detail for *Star Wars* fans remains pretty strong. Unless you're a parent of children of a certain age, the birds are easy to ignore. If you are that parent, do you really care if your eight-year-old is playing this over something you deem more 'worthy'? If so, you're fighting a losing battle. As is anyone trying to halt the *Angry Birds* train. At this point, it feels like the design of this franchise has peaked, though that's not to say *Star Wars* fans will feel the same way – there's still a lot of love pumped into referencing the immortal franchise.

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: Android
ORIGIN: Finland
PUBLISHER: Rovio
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £0.69
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN — ANGRY BIRDS STAR WARS

WORSE THAN — ANGRY BIRDS SPACE



FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

FIGURE COLLECTING: Like *Skylanders*, *Angry Birds Star Wars II* allows you to scan in toys to add characters to its roster.

VERDICT 5/10
A MODERATELY ENJOYABLE SEQUEL



Left: These office walls are full of telling nods and sardonic grins, compounding the feeling that this game knows far more than you ever will.

TAKING MORALITY OUT OF THE EQUATION

The Stanley Parable

***The Stanley Parable* may well be roundly accused of not being a game at all, but those doing so would be missing its purpose entirely.** Stanley the protagonist, designed to be something of a quintessential everyman (though this is somewhat exclusionary in practice), is a stock white, male twenty/thirtysomething with a tedious button-pushing office job. On the day the button-pushing orders stop, it's up to you as to how Stanley reacts.

Despite discovering that he's seemingly the only one in the office building, Stanley isn't alone, coaxed through a drab office labyrinth by an unnamed narrator. With crisp and witty dialogue, the writing is clearly accomplished; an arid composite of *Portal 2*'s GLaDOS and Wheatley. His unreliable narration or – perhaps more accurately – faintly unprepared narration describes Stanley's actions before he's even begun them. Curiously, you (Stanley) can actively disobey the narrated voice, and it's here where *The Stanley Parable* starts to get interesting.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Galactic Cafe
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
PLAYERS: Windows XP/ Vista/7/8, 3 GHz P4, Dual Core 2.0 or AMD64X2 2GB RAM, 128MB DirectX 9-compatible with support for Pixel Shader 2.0b. 3GB hard disk space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
BIOSHOCK



WORSE THAN
HALF-LIFE 2

The game's central thrust derives from choice, the central mechanic for both story and gameplay. Play is accessible, the notion of difficulty hardly entering the building, but from such simplistic beginnings is where *The Stanley Parable* begins to examine complex philosophies surrounding choice and free will. This audit on free will is thorough, venturing further than just musing on the issue.

It's difficult to discuss without ruining the game as a whole, but from chaos and confusion, Galactic Cafe somehow draws a solid over-arching structure. The story exists as both wandering possibility and chronologically interchangeable blocks, marrying into a healthy, plump whole. Even when *The Stanley Parable* risks being mired in such high concepts, though, the developer keeps the flow of the story together.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

TICKING THE RIGHT BOX: A thoughtful, wide-eyed approach to Steam achievements makes even laborious box-ticking feel an unprecedented pleasure.

Aside from its Source Engine origins, *Portal*'s influence on *The Stanley Parable*'s style and tone is palpable, making the clinical and mundane into the interesting and provocative. *The Stanley Parable* explores choice and meaning in the face of a cold and indifferent universe that certainly deserves further consideration after completion. It approaches its subject with confidence – like *Gone Home*, *The Stanley Parable* is likely to face the same questions of what makes a game, an argument we somewhat dismissed last month as being reductive in the face of progress for the industry. *The Stanley Parable* manages to expand that remit of what we can expect from videogame storytelling in a way that is compelling and rarely pretentious.

VERDICT 8/10
A FASCINATING LOOK AT THE NATURE OF CHOICE



Right: Blake Robertson's score twinges with an underlying unease, lifted straight from a period murder mystery, making Stanley's first steps from office 427 cautious and intriguing.

A JOURNEY AROUND THE WORLD THAT STILL FEELS LIKE COMING HOME

Professor Layton And The Azran Legacy

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Level-5
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now (Japan: 2 February)
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: PROFESSOR LAYTON AND THE CURIOUS VILLAGE

WORSE THAN: METEOS



The sixth game in the *Professor Layton* series takes the professor on a journey around the world, and the player on a journey to somewhere that's less a location and more a feeling: that of being sat in a comfy chair by a fire, pondering over a crossword like you've all the time in the world.

This is true despite the peril in the plot of a girl awoken from millennia frozen in ice and a criminal organisation that seeks to use her for its own evil ends. The opening chapters may see you solve puzzles to deter armed pursuers and unmanned drones, but the pace soon settles into an echo of the previous games.

The calmness of these middle sections, which you can play in any order (though the story doesn't change), contrasts with the opening but fits with Layton's character. Even when faced with danger, the professor responds with the kind of manners you rarely even find in grandparents these days, the epitome of an English gentleman. It's refreshing to be allowed this pace, to poke at the pretty 3D environments for hint coins or just for the comments from Layton and his friends, and to get acquainted with cartoony locals. Never do you feel too rushed to stop and solve a puzzle, even if it's nothing to do with the overarching plot.

This time around far more of the puzzles do bear some relevance to the story, but even when they don't it doesn't matter; the game embraces its incongruence with lighthearted in-jokes. The dozens of puzzles on offer do fall under a limited number of categories – jigsaws, maths problems, the traditional trick questions, and so on – but there's just enough variety to keep them fresh. And even when all of these are solved and the story comes to an end, the daily downloadable puzzles are like snapshots from your journey, a brief reminder of how nice it was to be there. If this really is the last *Professor Layton* game of its kind, that feeling will be much missed.



ALL IS WELL WITH THE PROFESSOR



Above: In the airship Bostonius, you can choose to visit the main locations in whichever order you choose, though if the idea of doing the puzzles out of numerical order bothers you, you may want to stick to the script.

DARE TO EXPECT EXCITEMENT AND IT'LL JUST LEAVE YOU COLD

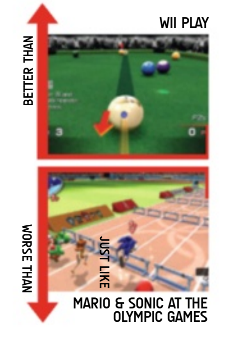
Mario & Sonic At The Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Sega Sports Japan
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4 online
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN: WII PLAY

JUST LIKE / WORSE THAN: MARIO & SONIC AT THE OLYMPIC GAMES



The unavoidable issue with the winter versions of these games is that the available events just aren't diverse enough to be interesting, particularly when translated to the Wii or Wii U; when you control them by tilting a stick, skis and snowboards feel identical. This is particularly noticeable in the campaign, which has you play through events in turn, made that much more boring because you can only play it in single-player.

Of course *Mario & Sonic* is better in multiplayer, when you and a partner circle around a shared Wii Remote in Figure Skating Pairs. Even that silly fun is muted, however, when you have to explain the rules because the game is noncommittal in doing so itself. Then again, proper instruction does not imply a fulfilled experience. Curling is preceded by paragraphs of text explaining how to draw a line on the GamePad to guide the other players, but is certainly not enjoyable enough to merit the extra effort.

Below: The game features 20 characters grouped according to their strength from the worlds of *Mario* and *Sonic*, including just four female characters (presumably so that four players can play Figure Skating Pairs).



As with its superfluous function in Curling, the GamePad is rarely used in a way that sells the Wii U over the Wii. It's at its best when used as a second screen that displays commentary during some events, and in single player you are sometimes allowed to use the analog sticks, but mostly it's just an alternative motion controller to tilt left and right. This reliance on simple motion controls is bound to put off the more serious sports fans who might otherwise make up for the family audience discouraged by the drab roster of games.

Casual players with a particular interest in winter sports may find a couple of events that appeal as a group activity, but it would be easier to stick to similar games you already own, rather than dig through the mundane parts of this one.

VERDICT 4/10

TOO BORING FOR FAMILIES, TOO TRIVIAL FOR SPORTS FANS

STILL THE BEST WAY TO DISCOVER YOUR INNER SIMON GRAYSON

Football Manager 2014

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac, Linux
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Sports Interactive
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-31
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



Even as recently as 2010, *Football Manager* was an almost impregnable fortress of understanding, with a difficulty curve that'd make even Tony Hawk think twice. It was an excellent game, sure, but to the untrained newcomer without a PhD in astrofootball, it was denser than a neutron star on *Hollyoaks*. Then came the age-old quandary of trying to let these fresh-faced youngsters in beyond the iron gates, without riling the townsfolk and its lovely elders. *Football Manager Classic* was introduced last year as a cruelty-free alternative to the steak and eggs of the main game, a skinnier version for those without thousands of hours to spend trying to find the right role for Morgan Amalfitano. But for those still wishing to dive studs-first into the standing leg of comprehensive football management, *Football Manager 2014* is definitely the game for you.

Gone are the tactical sliders of yestergame, ushering in a new era of touch-line shouts meaning no longer can passing styles be assigned arbitrary number values, like Sam Allardyce gliding through the Matrix. Shouts may seem lacklustre at first, but in a pragmatic reality they make a lot of sense – even the biggest money-ballers still tell their teams to retain possession or trebuchet the ball up to the head on a stick. The tactical choices are varied and partially colour-coded for compatibility so you can't go route one and retain possession at the same time, and the broadness of terms allows for greater variations while being more approachable for the less savvy. Combined with new, if laughably named, player roles, which allow odder-shaped players to find their niche, tactical play is more tailored, making the well-fought victories and frustrating profligacy ever the richer.

At first, the thousands of incremental changes might seem to be for nothing more than show, a big number on a blurb or a means to drip-feed new information as a marketing tactic. Indeed, the ability to select a hometown and preferred formation seem to have no bearing at all, but when viewed as a whole it's an education in accumulation. Live transfer haggling, grouped loanee updates and a greater availability of info sluiced straight to your inbox are all welcome, providing fertile soils for more enjoyable play.

Football Manager 2014 seeks to make the game more expansive for the ancients and receptive for the uninitiated, succeeding on all fronts. The match engine looks passable, and the sound might still be tinny and best left off, but by bringing new, priceless detail into the fore and a well-informed tactical refurbishment, Sports Interactive made the hardest job in football better than ever.

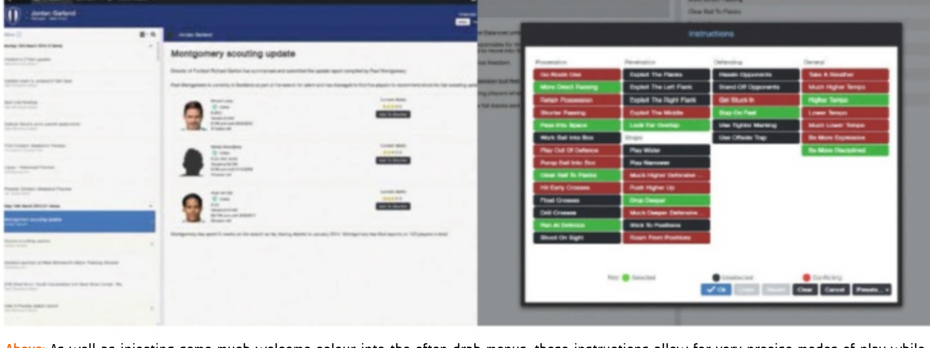
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SOUNDS FAMILIAR: The only sounds are generic crowd murmur and the shrill whistle peeps. If only there was something more varied, so long as it definitely doesn't include actual commentary.

Above: The match engine still inhabits the same space as *FIFA 2001*, but with some notably improved animations – especially tackling – and some much looser ball physics. It's certainly the best it has ever been.





Above: As well as injecting some much welcome colour into the often drab menus, these instructions allow for very precise modes of play while leaving the styles entirely up to the interpretation of the player.



A COMFORTABLE 4-0 WIN AWAY FROM HOME

TIME IS RUNNING OUT…

Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Survivor Overclocked

The narrative conceit of *Devil Survivor Overclocked* is an interesting one; the entire game is based around a death clock. From the offset, you know everyone in central Tokyo will die within seven days. During the first 30 minutes of gameplay, the stakes are set, and in a narrative trajectory similar to *Mass Effect 2*, your entire experience is shaped by the looming threat of death.

That isn't to say you *will* die, though. Through an open-ended and non-linear story, you can extend your allotted time. The central characters are given strange summoning devices – COMPs – that are basically 3DSs. "Are these game consoles?" asks one character. The game identifies and plays to its audience with mischievous self-awareness, justifying the ambitious feats of belief suspension the game's bizarre story asks of you.

Set in contemporary Japan and focusing on a cast of teens, the consoles your characters use provide regular email dumps explaining the complex SRPG mechanics. These emails provoke many discussions between the central characters, turning what could have been bland, flavour text -heavy tutorials into interesting scenes that provide satisfying characterisation and substantial world-building opportunities.

Characters discuss just how odd it is that a console UI can allow you to fuse demons in a virtual cathedral, purchase summons through an online auction house or set magical abilities to themselves… every mechanic is observed in-game, but this narrative-cum-gameplay device never gets old. Battles themselves are a mix of SRPG field navigation and traditional turn-based RPG combat, replacing the standard strategy/tactics convention with something altogether more innovative. You and your foes are given one turn to attack per unit, but exploiting weaknesses or landing criticals allows you an extra command, similar to *SMT: Lucifer's Call*'s press turn system.

Devil Survivor was a modern, darker answer to Square Enix's SRPG oeuvre, which subverted the otherworldly backdrop of the genre to offer a reflection and understanding of that culture that created it. *Overclocked* refreshes those ideas and builds on them – while 3D may be lacking and the animations primitive, the 3DS update brings *Overclocked* to audiences that may not have had chance to enjoy it before, and that alone is worth the asking price.

DETAILS

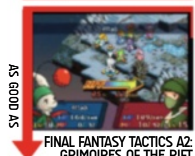
FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Ghostlight
DEVELOPER: Atlus
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

METAL GEAR AC!D



AS GOOD AS



FINAL FANTASY TACTICS A2: GRIMOIRES OF THE RIFT

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

EIGHTH DAY: *Overclocked* adds a ton of content – it has much nicer-looking, higher-resolution artwork, it adds over 20 extra demons, and there's an entire '8th day' that ties up loose story ends.

VERDICT 7/10

A SHINING, IF DATED, EXAMPLE OF RPG STORYTELLING



Left: There are over 150 demons available. Some are obtainable through auctions, and others must be made by fusing demons together.







Above: You are given a set number of days to live, and participating in events in the overworld costs precious allocated time. Deciding how to spend your days keeps tensions high and the story grounded in a vague reality.

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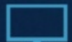




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UNDERACHIEVED WITH CRYENGINE 3

Warface

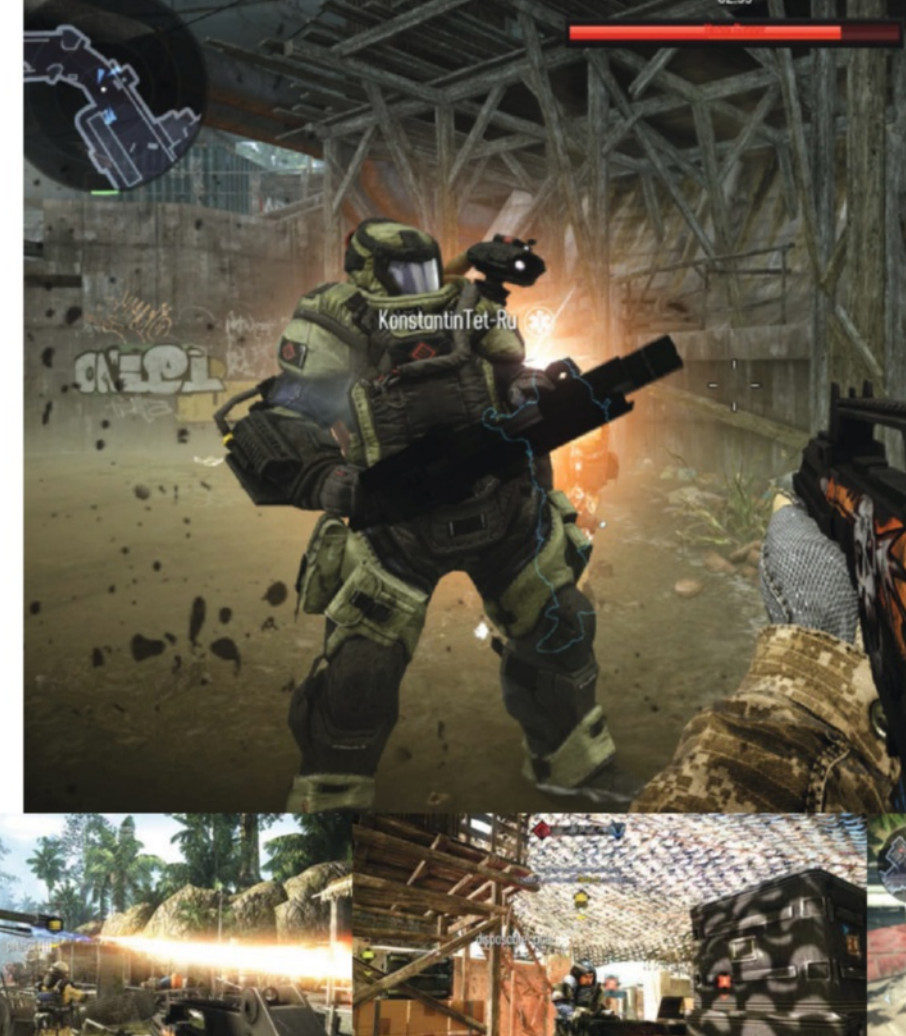
Adequacy is rarely something worth aspiring towards, but when you get past *Warface*'s crazy name, that's all you can expect from Crytek's first dipped toe into the world of free to play. In the unlikely event you were wondering, it's officially the nickname of the general who leads the good guys, a plucky band of rebellious soldiers fighting against an evil corporation that desperately wants to be the New World Order. That's far more plot than the game itself bothers with though, where the action is little more than one side running around with 'WARFACE' on their shirts like they're all trying to own a particularly lame insult, and the others claiming allegiance to Blackwood, aka Evil Inc. One wears blue, the other tan. That is all.

There's not much to say about the shooting, save that if you've played any military shooter ever, you've likely played a smoother take on this, and if Crytek's logo didn't appear at the start, you'd never know it had anything to do with it. Obviously, a free-to-play game that requires a big community to stay afloat was never going to approach the system-melting potential of a *Crysis* game, but at least some of their graphical chops wouldn't have gone amiss next to the likes of *Planetside 2*. Don't expect anything as interesting as the Nanosuit or the *Crysis* games' sense of place either. *Warface* is all about regular soldiers packing conventional weapons in stock wartime environments that wouldn't be out of place in *Counter-Strike*, with their only real notable moves being that they can slide during battle – use for getting under enemy fire while still shooting – and lend each other a hand to scale and pull partners over obstacles that are too high for a basic vault.

Those co-op missions involve your team being airlifted into a handful of assault courses around the world, fighting Blackwood troops who literally pop up out of thin air (occasionally behind you) and have AI more reminiscent of angry wasps than soldiers.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PC (X360 coming)
ORIGIN: Ukraine
PUBLISHER: Crytek
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: Free to play
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 2-16 (Online only)
MIN SPEC: Core 2 Duo, 1GB RAM, 512MB 3D
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Right: Heavy gunners have 'shoot me' lights on their back and less convenient deadly mini-guns in front. The evil Blackwood side also has a thing for mechs because they don't feel the need to play fair.



FAQs

Q. WHAT'S THE CONTROVERSY OVER FEMALE CHARACTERS?
Pandering. They're in the game, but look like models compared to the grizzled guys. According to Crytek that's still a compromise.

Q. WHY IS WARFACE F2P?
Crytek CEO Cevat Yerli announced that all its games were going that way. *Warface* is the test.

Q. WHAT GRAPHICS OPTIONS ARE THERE?
Depressingly few. Textures, shadows and so on can be tweaked, but CryEngine's selling points are most notable by their absence.

WARFACE'S PERFECT AUDIENCE IS GAMERS WHOSE PARENTS DON'T LOVE THEM ENOUGH TO BUY THEM THE NEXT BATTLEFIELD OR CALL OF DUTY





Left: You can clamber up small obstacles and vault others, but you will need a partner to get over high walls.

SPECIAL FORCES: TEAM X

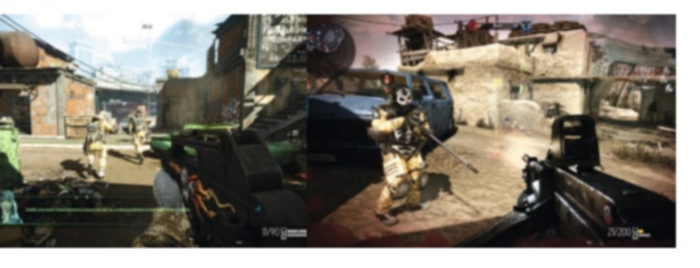
BETTER THAN



WORSE THAN

PLANETSIDE 2

Left: Blackwood buys children from poor mothers for the stem cells? Trying too hard to get James Bond's attention there…



HEADLINE: WORLD WIDE WAR

Warface runs in your browser, which has advantages for chat, friend management and multi-tasking. When the game starts, it goes full-screen. Between them, it drops back. However, this means that waiting in lobbies between games is jarring, especially in co-op, where every team wipe means returning and restarting the map from scratch, and the interface offers limited space for browsing screens like the shop. The option to run the whole thing full-screen would be good, though the current system will likely make more sense when Crytek's Gface gaming platform has more than one game to choose from and you can jump between them without long loading times or being disconnected from friends/chat.

Death comes quickly and without mercy, especially from snipers and rockets, with checkpoints restoring the team to full combat readiness but offering no protection against a full team wipe. Unfortunately, one of those also kicks you back to the lobby, making for some incredibly long waits between attempts. Aside from that, the action is like most of *Warface* – okay, but not great. Most of it is spent simply pushing through a linear map of corridors with occasional perches for sniping and taking cover, with the odd break for moments like riding a boat as it trashes enemy fortifications or escorting a tank that happily ploughs ahead into rocket fire without any interest in whether its defenders are keeping up. It's very uninspired stuff, with earning in-game funbucks the only reason to keep returning for more of the same.

The meat of *Warface*, though, is Versus mode, offering five modes – regular and Team Deathmatch, the *Counter-Strike* style Plant The Bomb, base-assaulting Storm, and the capture-and-hold game Destruction, in which both sides try to bring down airstrikes on the enemy base by taking a central control point. As in co-op, players can be one of four classes – Rifleman, Medic, Engineer or Sniper – each with their own weapons and gadgets. Engineers get the special tricks of planting claymore mines and restoring armour. Medics get a powerful short-range shotgun and a brief window of time to revive fallen soldiers. Riflemen can resupply both themselves and allies with fresh ammunition. Snipers simply shoot things from a long way off. Everyone is expected to play something of a support role in this way, though only Medics actually seem to bother.

This being a free-to-play game, the spectre of the store inevitably hangs over the action. *Warface* is relatively restrained there, though. Players with upgraded gear do have a notable advantage, as seen the second you step out of the newbie servers. Everything has to be unlocked before it can be purchased outright, though, and is available for both real money and in-game currency – but *Warface* isn't generous with the latter, and it also has to be spent on keeping equipment you do buy in good condition. There's no matchmaking, and the server browser is functional at best, but players are at least funnelled into Rookie/Experienced channels based on level to help avoid anyone getting steamrolled, with the option to also join anything-goes Pro servers.

If and when you want to spend money, though, *Warface* is more than ready. Standard gear is bought outright, though grenades are consumables, and most of the goodies from cash-only random boxes – the closest *Warface* gets to pay-to-win territory for the moment – are loaners or limited use items. Even basic weapons can rack up kills though, and the absolute top-tier equipment can only be borrowed by spending a third currency – Crowns – primarily earned from co-op. The Crown Helmet, for instance, rentable for two weeks, detects enemy claymore mines, while the Medic's Crown Shotgun works at close to a Rifleman's range.

While tooled up, the action never inspires. It's okay and reasonably inoffensive, but lacking in a single thing that really stands out, and that includes being free to play. If its perfect audience is anyone, it's gamers whose parents don't love them enough to buy them the new *Battlefield* or *Call Of Duty*. CryEngine is utterly wasted on these static, bulletproof warehouses and empty streets, and even at its best the shooting is hollow, with staggeringly little personality for anything that asks to be called *Warface*. Being a test run for Crytek's F2P ambitions is nothing for it to be ashamed of, but that it doesn't feel like anything more is a disappointment.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

NEWBIE LOCKS: A number of the maps and the Destruction game mode are unavailable to new players – levels 1-12. As of Level 6, however, you can promote yourself out of the sandpit to Experienced.



FREE BUT BLAND, A FAR CRY FROM CRYTEK'S CAPABILITIES

AN ENCOURAGING WORK IN PROGRESS

Wii Sports Club

DETAILS

FORMAT: Nintendo Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Namco Bandai/ In-House
PRICE: £8.99 / £1.79
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN: SPORTS CHALLENGE
WORSE THAN: WII SPORTS

Still the single best-selling videogame of all time, the resurrection of Nintendo's *Wii Sports* series was always a forgone conclusion, and not only because of that astounding sales data: 82.9 million units sold worldwide to date. If anything, the inevitability of *Wii Sports Club* has more to do with the frequent mismanagement of the Wii U brand, featuring Nintendo's ongoing campaign to confuse and bewilder almost everyone aside from the prescient hardcore. If one property is going to bring the mass market and the Kyoto goliath together again, it's got to be Wii Sports.

The main problem is that *Wii Sports Club* has launched on Wii U as an incomplete package, offering up just two (Bowling and Tennis) of the Wii original's spread of five activities. The pricing structure isn't too aggressive – you can own each sport for £8.99, or rent them for 24 hours each at £1.79 a time – but the fact that Nintendo hasn't ruled out a full retail release for the finished article (when coupled with the intermittent but dire netcode issues) result in a suite that's far from essential at present. While some people will see £8.99 as a pittance for something as brilliantly refined as the Bowling, others may question why so little has been done to the formula. Basically you're likely to respond in one of two ways: with joy that Nintendo hasn't tinkered with perfection, or with disdain at being asked to pay nine quid for something you already own.

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

RESTRICTED: Sadly the EU version of *Wii Sports Club* doesn't currently allow you to play online against all available gamers. Matchmaking is restricted to European and Australian players only.

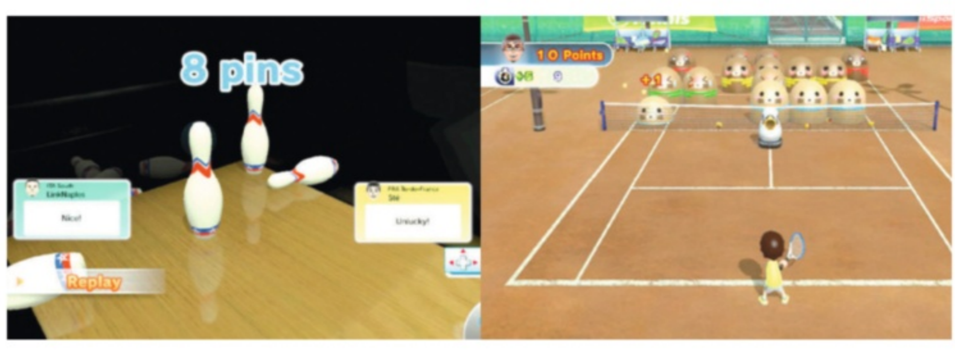
Wii Motion Plus is now mandatory, which does seem a tad unnecessary. Not only is Bowling largely indistinguishable from its offline Wii forebear, the extra precision has turned Tennis into something completely different. It's still fun, but the learning curve is surprisingly steep, and if you previously enjoyed simply flicking your wrist from the comfort of your sofa, be aware that those days are now most definitely gone.

So aside from a few cosmetic bells and whistles, what you're paying for here is the ability to play two old favourites online, but at present the online functionality is a real mixed bag. Centring all competition around a set of region-specific clubs was a masterstroke, but the leaderboards are currently based exclusively on each region's win ratio, so the front-runners are always the regions with the least amount of players in them. Wonky input delay and random disconnects have plagued both games during launch week, and you can't ever back into a sub-menu: pressing back always takes you straight to the first screen. Everyone gets a free 24-hour pass when they first boot it up so your Christmas Day is sorted; hopefully upcoming content and fixes will keep you hanging around.



Above: Stamps (which you collect in your own personal stamp book) are essentially achievements, and they're earned by doing things like scoring a turkey for the first time in Bowling, or keeping a good rally going in Tennis.



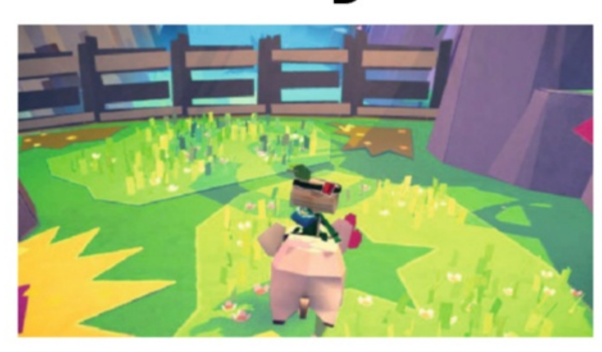


Above: Annoyingly voice chat isn't supported at all, so communication with fellow online players is restricted to a collection of cheerful pre-set pleasantries. If you're fond of watching your own replays, expect your opponents to constantly spam them to hurry you.

VERDICT 6/10
NOT A MUST-HAVE JUST YET

ONCE UPON A TIME, IN A WORLD OF PAPER AND GLUE...

Tearaway





Above: Your face acts as the sun in *Tearaway*'s world and is the point of focus for Iota's quest, providing a palpable connection between the real and the game worlds. Luckily, you're not rated on attractiveness...
Left: Media Molecule fires goodwill at you as if from Homer Simpson's make up gun, sprayed all over your face.

Media Molecule's latest feels every bit like a game built by the developers of *LittleBigPlanet*. *Tearaway* is charming, outlandish, imaginative and whimsical in equal proportions. Crucially, however, it's more cohesive than the world that Sackboy built. You play as an envelope, an envelope named Iota with a message to deliver. That loose narrative is indicative of the overall tone of *Tearaway*, a game in which the broad strokes are defined but the details are left blank for you to fill in.

Each of the game's visual building blocks takes the form of papercraft constructions, resulting in an aesthetic that manages to feel at once childlike and complex. The fact that everything you see in the game could be reproduced in the real world by anyone with access to paper and scissors accentuates your connection with the world, elevating the experience from the realm of the quaint and twee to something with a little more heart and soul.

This is a 3D platformer that is at once unapologetically representative of the genre, while also managing to feel completely removed from it. You can jump, roll, pick up objects and throw them on your way to tackling various chasms, enemies and headlong sprints from danger. It all feels very typical until you start to embrace the ways in which you can influence the world through frequent breakages of the fourth wall.

Via the Vita's front camera your face appears within the sun whenever the celestial body comes into view (literally, you are the sun), and you're frequently asked to personalise the game world by gluing new bits of paper to people and places or by adding your own photos. Combine that with the front and rare touch controls that allow you to dispatch enemies, peel the paper world apart and activate jump pads, and tilt controls that reposition platforms, and you've got in your hands what could well represent the best use of the Vita's features to date.

The true triumph for Media Molecule is that none of the 'extra-curricular' controls or feel forced or unnecessary. On the contrary, each and every one feels natural and works just as you would expect to it should. That intuitiveness is thanks in no small part to DIY look of the papercraft world, a design choice that tickles your instincts to get involved and touch/change the world with your own hands.

Made out of paper it might be, but *Tearaway* is anything but flat. This is Media Molecule showing it can make a game as well as it can make a set of creation tools, and it only makes you more excited about what's to come from them in future.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sony Computer Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Media Molecule
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: November 22 (Japan: December 5/US: November 22
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: SLY COOPER: THIEVES IN TIME



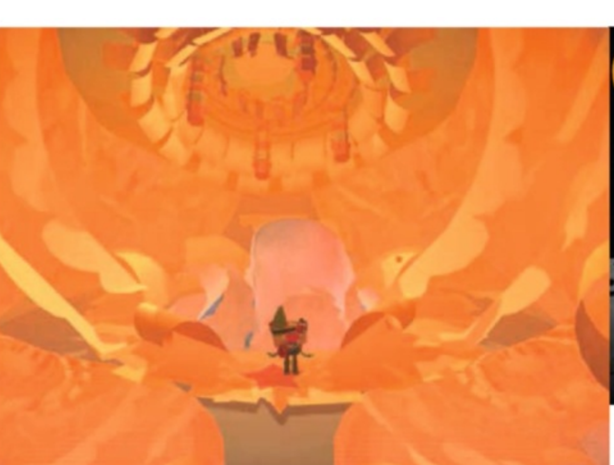
AS GOOD AS: LITTLEBIGPLANET VITA

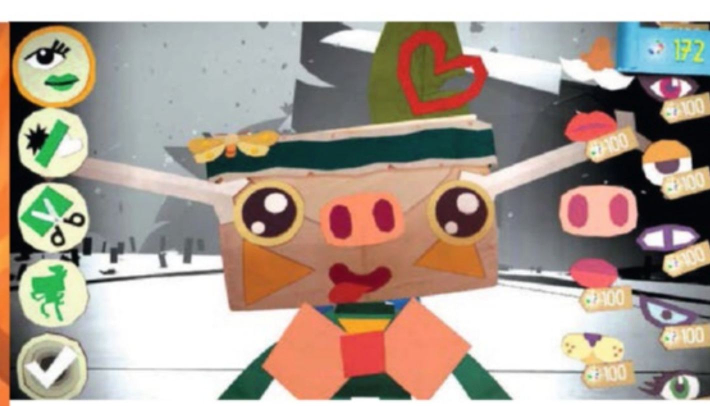
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

DIGITAL ORIGAMI: As you progress you'll find and unlock blueprints for in-game items/characters that can be printed and assembled by you in the real world.

VERDICT 8/10
A WONDERFUL COMBINATION OF VISUALS AND GAMEPLAY





Right: Iota can be customised in any way you see fit, using either the pre-defined shapes or by designing and cutting out your own. It's a wonderful feature. There are no limits, and eyes, nose, mouth and other 'normal' features are optional.



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Wasteland

CHRIS AVELLONE, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT

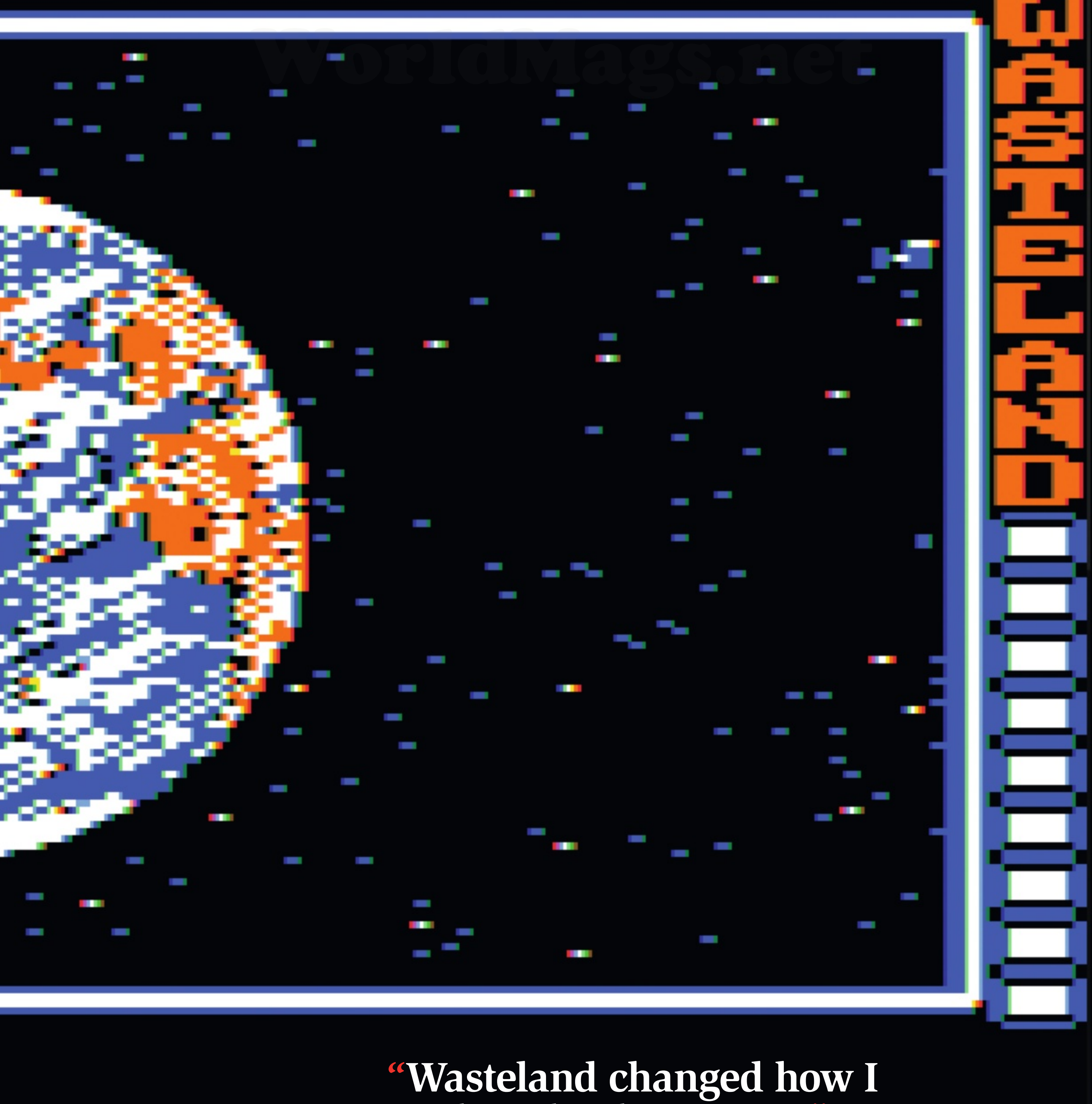
“*When I first saw* Wasteland *in my local gaming store in 1988, at first, I didn't buy it. I didn't trust it. My mistake, I should have caved earlier than I did –* Wasteland *changed how I thought about RPGs. It took a genre largely locked in place by* Wizardry *and* Bard's Tale *and proved that narrative and a character's defining architecture can play with existing game mechanics in such a way to breathe life into a setting.*

Much like Wizard's Crown*, the skill customisation in* Wasteland *allowed me to imagine* role-playing *my characters, giving them identity outside of their attributes. More importantly, the narrative context for the level design floored me… one of the 'levels' in the game is projecting your consciousness into an android's brain. In all respects, it functions like the previous levels, but you fight nightmares using your Intelligence attribute (!), drift through your memories and those of your enemy, using all the same system mechanics, but with such a simple, brilliant context shift.*

Wasteland *taught me to think outside the box and how a modular game system can be married with narrative to create a unique situation, and for that, I applaud it. I am proud to be working on the sequel today.*”







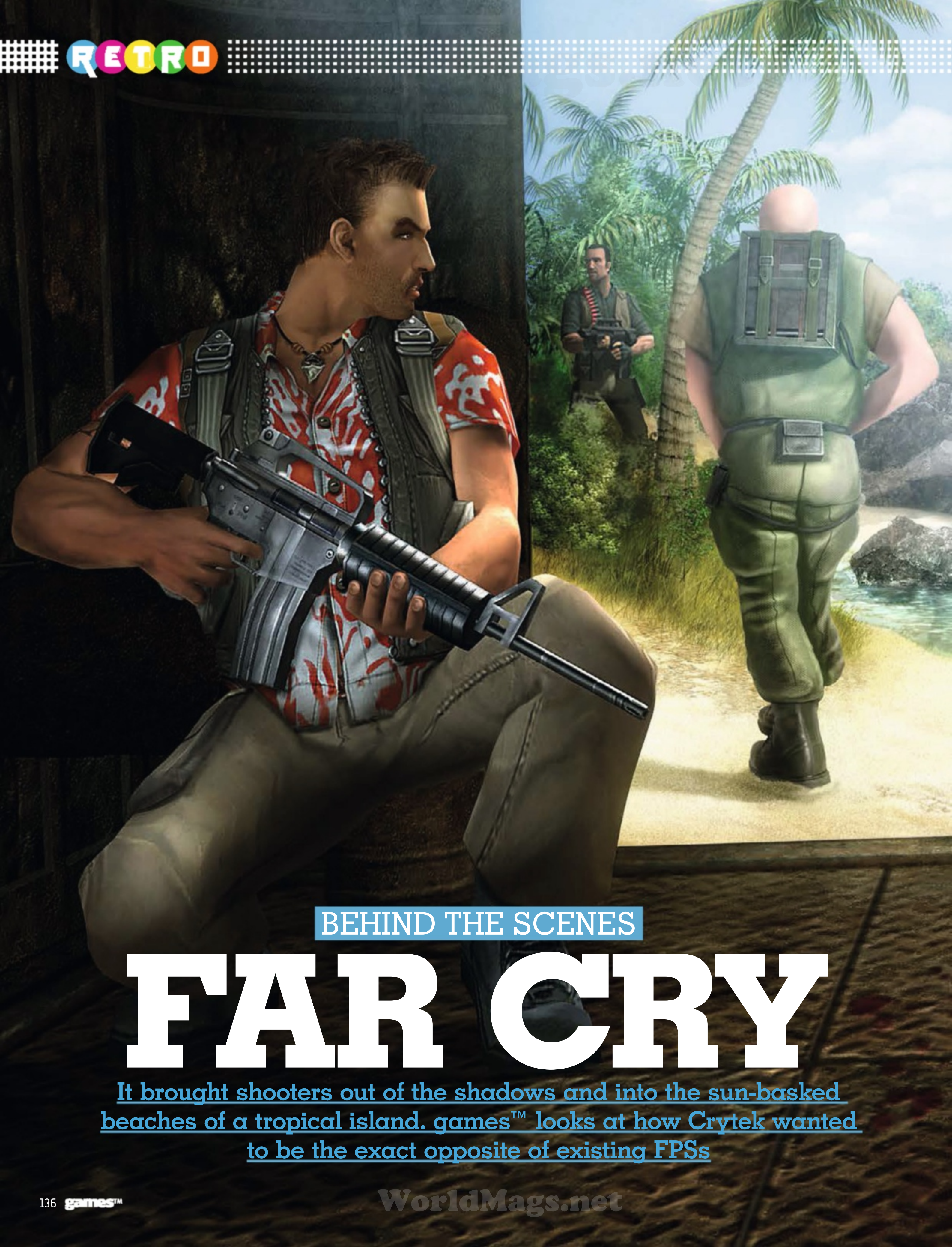
> “Wasteland changed how I thought about RPGs”
>
> **CHRIS AVELLONE, OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT**

ritten by Alan Pavlish

RETRO



NO.142 DECEMBER 2013



BEHIND THE SCENES

FAR CRY

It brought shooters out of the shadows and into the sun-basked beaches of a tropical island. games™ looks at how Crytek wanted to be the exact opposite of existing FPSs



Cevat Yerli wanted *Far Cry* to have a mix of indoor and outdoor scenes to allow the player to explore.

Released: 2004
Format: PC
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Crytek
Key Staff: Cevat Yerli (founder), Jack Mamais (design producer), Christopher Natsuume (lead producer), Richard Tsao (multiplayer producer), Chris Auty (designer)

IT HAS BEEN almost nine years since Cevat Yerli released *Far Cry* but a good 16 since the seeds of that game were planted. Yerli was already showing signs of being a good programmer – he created a game called *Trader* for the Amstrad CPC 6128 and he went on to produce *Moi-Thai* for the C64 – but in 1996 he played a game that would change his life forever. That game was *Quake*.

Before *Quake*, the games he loved to play and the games he loved to make were very different. Although he made games based around economics and martial arts, he preferred to play strategy and football titles, *Kick Off* being a particular favourite. "I actually never liked to make the games that I played for fun," Yerli declares. "Until I discovered *Quake*."

"*Quake* became for me a fundamental decision maker," he added. "I actually skipped the whole *Doom* thing – it just never clicked with me. But *Quake* did. I began to become interested in the modding scene and the communities around *Quake* and I really enjoyed it. It inspired me so I started to assemble a team across the internet, bringing together communities of members and programmers and kick-started Crytek. *Quake* led to the fact that we made *Far Cry*."

Cevat Yerli started the ball rolling for what would become Crytek in 1997 but the company wasn't established for a further two years. During that time, the team of 40 or so professional programmers and graphic artists he had assembled online had been producing games, including a demo which was called *X-Isle: Dinosaur Island*. "I showed this to my brothers, Faruk and Anvi, and said we should go to the some trade shows with it," Yerli recalls. "We went to E3 in 1999 and met with NVIDIA. We had 15 minutes to show off what we had, but our meeting ended up taking two hours. They liked *X-Isle* and we did a deal. I could then hire real people for the first time."

X-Isle became an educational demo. It made use of the GeForce3 nfiniteFX engine to create a truly expansive outdoor *Jurassic Park*-like environment rendered in real-time. It evolved with detailed vast landscapes populated by dinosaurs realistically interacting together, real-time lighting and progressive mesh technology. It enabled Crytek to have massive scenes with more than 50 skeletal animated dinosaurs walking through at once, but it also enabled NVIDIA to show off its hardware capabilities.

But that wasn't the end of it. Yerli was keen to build upon *X-Isle* and turn it into a commercial triple-A game. The company signed a deal with Ubisoft and, in 2001, the Crytek team took all of their expertise and experience and began to develop the OpenGL-driven CryEngine upon which *Far Cry* would be built.

Even then, however, the end result wasn't entirely clear. Yerli and his team kept shifting their focus and there was much chopping and changing: "We had this idea of a game of multiple aliens fighting it out as a multiplayer game," Yerli recalls. "We then killed the aliens and stuck with just humans, still multiplayer, and then we went from this multiplayer with humans only into single-player with aliens. And then we removed the aliens again and then we made a game with mutants. And this happened all in three years. So we really did three games in three years."

I WAS IMPRESSED WITH THE TECHNOLOGY OF THE CRYENGINE RIGHT FROM THE START

WHAT WAS EMERGING, however, was an FPS, but not one that shoehorned players down claustrophobic corridors, pausing at corners, awaiting whatever may decide to appear in front or, more frighteningly, from behind. Crytek was creating sunny beaches where the sea lapped against the sand. It was inviting, it was expansive and it looked luxurious. Like a breath of fresh sea air, it was taking the FPS into the wide and beautiful world.

>. A GAMING EVOLUTION Quake > Far Cry > Crysis



Cevat Yerli loved *Quake* and, for the first time, he wanted to develop a game that he had enjoyed playing himself.



Crytek didn't make the sequels to *Far Cry*. Instead it went on to produce *Crysis*, which was released in 2007.



THE TURNING POINT

■ WHEN YERLI and his brothers showed their game to NVIDIA at E3 in 1999, a group of 20 journalists had wandered by and expressed how much they liked what they had seen. It helped to persuade NVIDIA to do a deal with Crytek, although its representatives had also been impressed.

That original demo disc had such an impact on the growth of Crytek and on the future of first-person shooters that it currently resides in the Video Game Museum of Rome where, since July this year, it has been on display permanently. The museum's director, Marco Accordi Rickards, says he is happy at the addition: "Crytek represents the state of the art of games. Their first original demo disc is a priceless new item for our museum."

The disc is one of more than 440 exhibits tracing the origins of gaming. It also has an interactive history section with 36 game machines.







Treading a fine line between jaw-dropping realism and high-res synthetic sheen, you can't help but be impressed by the composition of the environments, and if your PC is speedy enough then you're in for a real treat.

games™
Issue 17, April 2004

"What we wanted really was to make *Quake* an island," says Yerli. "And then we changed it into a story game with a guy in a red shirt swimming around an island." *Far Cry* is well known for having a flimsy plot but Yerli is unrepentant. "Back then, people really didn't care too much about a story. It really was about the basic conception of where you were," he said. "It was also about who you could shoot effectively so it was an island with some crazy mercenaries and then we added this fictional layer to it with Dr Krieger who had this research going on and mutants and super soldiers and all the rest of it."



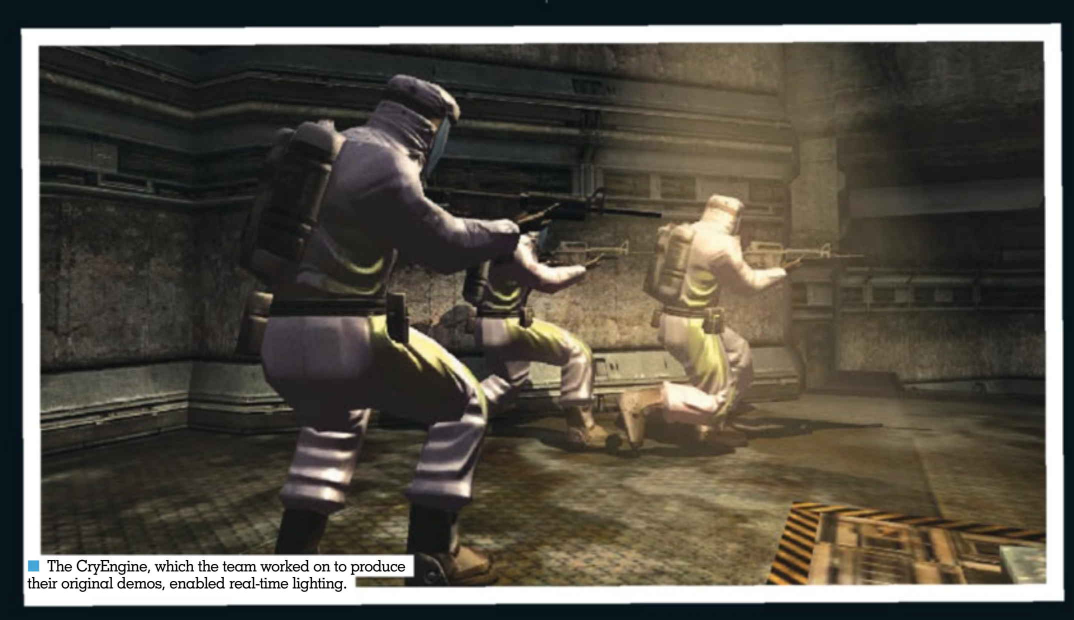
CEVAT YERLI
Founder

Christopher Natsuume remembers this period well. He was the game's lead producer, brought on board to help with the design and direction of the product. He was needed to give the game greater focus, mixing stealth and action and giving the player control over where to go, what to do and how to attack enemies. He took inspiration from *Die Hard*, *Rambo* and *Apocalypse Now*.

"All of the FPS games were doing dark, gritty and industrial and the deal we signed with Ubisoft was based on the *X-Isle* demo that Cevat and a few others made which was all about dinosaurs on a tropical island. I came into the project well after they dropped the dinos but they still had the tropical island and that was my basis to work on."

One of the key features Yerli had insisted upon was a one-kilometre view. "Long-range gameplay was one of a few key features Cevat felt defined the game and set it apart," says Natsuume. The idea was that the game would be more interesting, and provide more tactical freedom, if you could see long ranges and make decisions based on that. This proved to be more or less true."

Production was hard going. There were lots of late nights at Crytek's studios and many arguments about what should be going into the game. "The hardest part, honestly, was getting people to buy into the idea of what we were trying to do with our AI," says Natsuume, of artificial intelligence that allowed the unscripted enemy to sense you and then hunt you down, as well as become bored and do their own thing. "The thinking at the time was that a heavily scripted, cinematic AI would get you 'wow scenes' – moments that looked like moments from movies.



■ The CryEngine, which the team worked on to produce their original demos, enabled real-time lighting.

"PEOPLE WANTED THE camera just so and the action just so in these moments – but what we were doing was trying to let the player develop their own 'wow scenes' through free-roaming gameplay, where what you did actually drove the AI actions. These two philosophies were largely at odds and we had a hell of a time convincing people that it was more interesting to let the AI drive themselves logically and see what came out of that than to script specific moments in the game."

As time went on, the design for the single-player game was deemed to need even greater focus and Jack Mamais was brought in as design producer. His job was to improve the missions and he came aboard around a year before the game shipped – when, he says, it was still in a very rough pre-alpha stage.

"I was super impressed with the technology of the CryEngine right from the start," he says. "The programmers and artists had produced the best environments I had ever seen in any game but the design at that time was rather weak. Most of the missions were doing essentially the same thing and the moment to moment experience had not really been defined yet.

"We created a new type of process called 'the pit' where Peter Kotevski, the AI programmer, myself, and the level designer of each mission would sit in the motion capture room and work together to hammer out the specifics of each mission. Peter was awesome and instrumental in making each mission work."

CHRIS NATSUUME
Lead producer

Yerli had some strict desires. He had examined the many successful shooters that had been launched and wanted the exact opposite of them. He wanted pseudo open-world gameplay rather than linear, although he wanted to retain bunkers, caves, tunnels and compounds. It meant that *Far Cry*, despite coming out of nowhere, was able to rival the likes of *Doom 3*.

The arsenal was another key part of the game. "The weapon choice was already in place when I started but I really enjoyed the P-90 – it rocked," says Mamais. Natsuume agrees. "The long-range gameplay part of the game favoured long-range, high-effect weapons like the sniper rifle," he says. "But first-person shooters tend to have pretty much the same stuff: a pistol, an assault rifle, grenades,


Far Cry established Crytek as world leaders when it came to graphics in contemporary videogames.

a rocket launcher. I think most people have a favourite weapon based on the way they like to play."

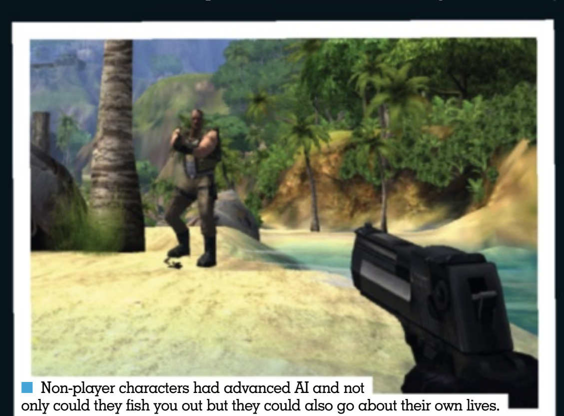
THE FACT THAT the game was still far from complete with a year to go was symptomatic of the organic process the game had gone through although the CryEdit tool made creating larger environments easier. "We kept throwing things against the wall to see if they stuck," said Mamais. "We had a few more mutants in the game originally and some of them got dropped. We also got rid of a few missions and scenarios that either did not work or were beyond the scope of the project."

Some decisions proved controversial when the game came to be reviewed and played. The save-game feature was frustrating at times since the decision was made to only save at certain thresholds. "That was 100 per cent my fault, and my call," says Natsuume. "The thinking at the time was that if you allowed a save game at any moment, people would not see how the AI responded differently to different situations – because they would not replay the situations. Time and experience… I think in the end that was the wrong call."

Still, the game reviewed well and players loved what the CryEngine had helped to bring to the gaming table. While the sequels ended up being open-world survivalist adventures, the original was an involving shooter that pushed the boundaries of technology, was amazing to look at and played with very few flaws. It managed to combine this with levels of a size that was unprecedented for the time. With *Far Cry*, the individual approach was at the centre of how the game played out.

"What Crytek really did for me was convince me that you could start something from scratch – and you could build a truly international, independent studio that could do great things," says Natsuume who left Crytek after *Far Cry* to start Boomzap.

As for Yerli, he is understandably proud of what he and his team achieved. "For us, it's about pushing the limits and sometimes you can look at what others do and become disheartened when they achieve what you thought was not possible," he says. "But the irony is many years later when we did *Far Cry* I heard how other pros were disheartened by it and said they wanted to quit their jobs because they couldn't reach this quality any more. But they can. We can all aspire to push the limits."


Non-player characters had advanced AI and not only could they fish you out but they could also go about their own lives.

FROM THE FORUM

Posted by:
SHINYMCSHINE

I'm not the greatest fan of FPS games and I am pretty useless with keyboard/mouse combination when trying to play them but I did play *Far Cry* (PC) for a while. It took me a while to get the hang of the controls but the early stages of the game were pretty impressive as far as I can remember, when you were mostly taking out human opponents. The bit on the boat was particularly good. It was by the time I got deeper into the jungle, with the "cloaked" aliens where my interest wandered off.

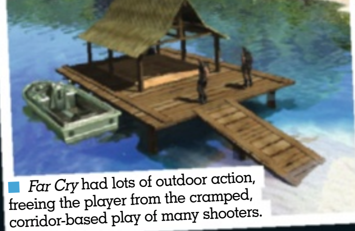
Posted by:
RETRO 74

I've never played it, PC only wasn't it? It's one of those series that I will never play now like *Crysis*, just not comfortable starting with number 2. When they bring a PC series to console they should always include a port of the earlier game for weirdos like me. *[Note, an Xbox Live Arcade port is said to be on its way]*.

Posted by:
RICHARDJONES129

For me, *Far Cry* was a breath of fresh air and it shook up the shooter genre. I liked the way it was so expansive and didn't seem to restrict players. This is definitely one of the best games I've played.


Far Cry grew into an FPS from its origins as a tech demo with dinosaurs.


Far Cry had lots of outdoor action, freeing the player from the cramped, corridor-based play of many shooters.



BEST INTRO

HALF-LIFE
VALVE **1998**

■ EVERYTHING YOU ever need to know about Gordon Freeman is revealed during *Half-Life*'s torpid opening minutes. Following the taciturn theoretical physicist on what is essentially his commute to work, you not only get an insight into the enormity of the work being carried out within the Black Mesa research facility, but how mundane a routine it is up until the moment another dimension involuntarily tears into our own. This wasn't another lughead marine tossed into a bug hunt, it was a pragmatic scientist thrown into an impossible situation using only his wits to survive. *Half-Life* was rightly lauded for its rejuvenation of the first-person shooter, but it's easy to forget how effortlessly it managed to introduce such an iconic character without him ever having to utter a single word.



GAME CHANGERS

METAL GEAR SOLID

Released: 1998 (Japan, US), 1999 (UK) **Publisher:** Konami
Developer: KCEJ **System:** PlayStation



Metal Gear Solid has sold six million copies, which was surpassed by *Metal Gear Solid 2*'s seven million when it was released back in 2001.

Kojima created the modern stealth genre with this influential cyber thriller, as well as introducing the iconic Solid Snake to audiences worldwide…

KOJIMA'S 3D TRANSLATION of his MSX *Metal Gear* series was a landmark game due to its details and depth. You can see this in the way it was initially promoted during E3 1997: displays of Snake blowing up guards with about 20 consecutive C4 bombs, figuring out snowy land masses through the scope and machine-gunning an invisible cyborg ninja while office debris flies through the air. It's this extra dimension to design that makes *Metal Gear Solid* such a significant part of the history of our medium – this was the birth of the modern stealth genre in all its details, all its possibilities in approaching situations however you liked.

For many players, *Metal Gear Solid* was a shock to the system in that Snake's shooting and basic action abilities were just alternative paths in the game – instead, sneaking around was the point. Stealth is something players had to mentally adjust to. That first scenario, when Snake is waiting for the elevator after crawling out of the water, is a brilliantly disguised tutorial. Approach it with open fists and you realise that enemies don't die after they're knocked over. You have no guns, and once the alarm goes off, that's pretty much it for you.

Then you learn to be quiet. You learn how to choke enemies without accidentally throwing them with the square button, you learn not to tread through the water on your way past guards and, crucially, you learn to wait. And, once you've grasped these fundamentals, you get good at everything else in *Metal Gear Solid*, too, including the combat. Understanding how to use everything in Snake's inventory, like the scope, claymore mines and rations enables you to look at every environment laterally, like a puzzle with many solutions, and be rewarded by the intricacy of the way you tackle the situation.

It's still arguably Kojima's most engaging piece of work, on a par with *MGS3* and far outstripping *Sons Of Liberty* as well as, to a lesser extent, *Guns Of The Patriots*. Each Metal Gear Solid game is an escalating journey from A to B, fraught with the madness of a gauntlet of boss fights along the way, increasingly bizarre environments and the promise of an unpredictable climax. *Metal Gear*'s boss fights are the best in the field, frankly. In *MGS*, Kojima took the time to underline the menace of each one.

They all have their own angle on insanity; Revolver Ocelot opts for a gun duel in a close-quarters C4

THE STORY OF MGS: IN BRIEF

WE ENDEAVOUR TO SUM UP KOJIMA'S SELF-DESTRUCTING NARRATIVE IN ONE BOXOUT



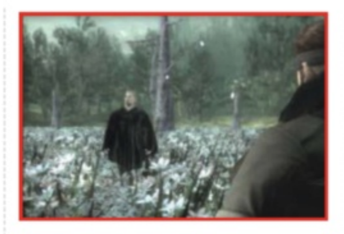
METAL GEAR SOLID

★ Big Boss clone Solid Snake is dispatched onto Shadow Moses to stop Liquid, who's holding America hostage with nuclear arms. Snake tries to rescue people from Liquid's FOXHOUND unit but they die. Snake eliminates FOXHOUND one-by-one, saves Meryl and Otacon, destroys the robot Metal Gear then beats Liquid.



METAL GEAR SOLID 2

★ Snake finds out that the US military has built a Metal Gear, which Ocelot steals. Time jumps forward, and Raiden is looking to stop Solidus Snake, who it's later revealed raised him. It turns out the game has been an attempt by the Patriots to recreate the circumstances of Shadow Moses with Raiden in place of Snake.



METAL GEAR SOLID 3

★ It's the Sixties, and Big Boss (Naked Snake) is dispatched to rescue a scientist. His mentor, The Boss, betrays him and defects to the Soviet Union. Snake is sent to terminate her, before the truth about the manipulation of The Boss and betrayal by love interest EVA lead to the greatest videogame ending of all time.



METAL GEAR SOLID 4

★ Snake is old. The world is the subject of a war economy manipulated by Liquid Ocelot and presided over by the Patriots, who are an AI created by *MGS3*'s Zero. Raiden is a robot ninja. Big Boss turns up. Meryl marries Johnny Sasaki. Raiden's child is the Milkybar Kid. The ending is too long. Snake wins and has an iPod.

trap, Psycho Mantis infiltrates the mind of love interest Meryl and puts a gun against her head to manipulate Snake, Gray Fox brutally murders soldiers at random, Vulcan Raven cruises around in a tank and Sniper Wolf spends entire days picking out her targets. Then there's the main villain: Liquid Snake. A clone of Big Boss like Solid Snake himself and therefore his genetic equal, despite having an inexplicable bizarre British-American accent and a blonde mullet. They're innovative in appearance, thanks to Yoji Shinkawa's character designs, as well as grotesquely charismatic in their portrayal.

■■■ THEY'RE THE MAIN event in *Metal Gear Solid*, each framed with this mythical feeling of threat, like each comes preloaded with their own torrid histories that have shaped them into these chaotic figures. They all feel like they belong in Shadow Moses, this foreign-feeling icy kingdom of madness. It's become tiresomely popular to slate Hideo Kojima's use of cut-scenes, but the way bosses are presented in *MGS* is convincingly cinematic, right down to their names appearing on-screen with the actor's in brackets.

And that's the other component of *Metal Gear Solid*'s DNA, the one that is often knocked and rarely applauded when it's good: the influence of cinema.

IT'S STILL KOJIMA'S MOST ENGAGING PIECE OF WORK, ON A PAR WITH METAL GEAR SOLID 3

KEY FACTS

- *Metal Gear Solid* topped the United Kingdom charts for eight weeks when it was originally released in 1999, which was a record at the time.
- One of the only games in the series to get a PC port – and actually quite a good one – *Metal Gear* found its way to Windows in late 2000 and works on Windows 7, though it's not available on Steam or GOG.
- *Metal Gear Solid* was remade as *The Twin Snakes* in 2003 by Silicon Knights, but the developer fluffed it a bit by changing the music and rerecording the voice acting. But it did look nice.

Yes, it's full of cutscenes, but the vast majority are good cutscenes, elevated by a fairly well-translated script and a superb voice cast who were far and above the industry standard at the climax of the CD-ROM age. The story was full of silly bits but there was conviction in the way it was presented, with David Hayter's dramatic gruff interpretation of Snake making him one of the first videogame characters to instantly be known on voice alone.

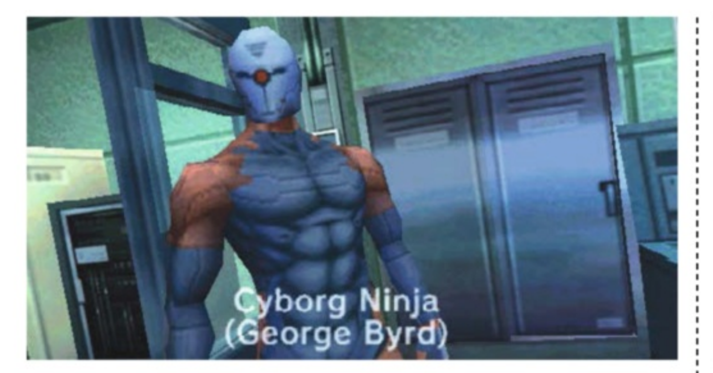
Just like the stealth mechanics, this cinematic presentation felt new to people. That Kojima handled it so well was expected after such a broad sweep of hype prior to the game's release, and the narrative became intrinsic to the reveal of whatever challenges the player would face next, including the aforementioned bosses. It was by no means the first title to achieve this (Westwood's *Blade Runner* was perhaps even more revolutionary with mo-cap in 1997), but for many of the six million gamers who hadn't seen videogames convincingly brush with motion pictures, this would be a watershed moment.

That's just one part of why *Metal Gear Solid* holds up today, in fact, much better than its flawed successor, bogged down as it is by adolescent conspiracy nonsense and a truncated narrative. The rebirth of the stealth genre prompted by *MGS*, a feat shared with *Thief: The Dark Project*, led to the rise (and eventual fall) of *Splinter Cell* and *Metal Gear*'s own progression in its third and fourth instalments, as well as the proliferation of this genre's mechanics in every game from *GTA* to *Tomb Raider*. Hideo Kojima, meanwhile, became one of the industry's leading lights and the kind of public figure where people would pay attention to absolutely everything he had to say. *Metal Gear Solid* is a worthy success story, a game that remains very easy to fall in love with.

GAME CHANGERS

TEN EXAMPLES OF MAD GENIUS IN METAL GEAR SOLID

THOSE MOMENTS AND IDEAS THAT DEFINED KOJIMA'S PLAYSTATION ORIGINAL, FOR BETTER OR WORSE



"NEITHER ENEMY NOR FRIEND"

"I'VE COME FROM another world to do battle with you." The depiction of Gray Fox, Snake's former ally turned resuscitated villain (then ally again) Frank Jaeger is one of the more interesting parts of the game's story due to the character's moral ambiguity, connections to Snake, horrific murder of soldiers in a corridor and redemptive finale. Yoji Shinkawa's skeletal design of this cyborg ninja is one of the most iconic created for a videogame.



MERYL – LOVE INTEREST OR NOT?

MERYL WAS THE token love interest who played the most bizarre role in the story – just why was she in Shadow Moses to begin with? Based on a character of the same name and appearance from Kojima's earlier title *Snatcher*, which came out more than a decade before *MGS*, Meryl flirts a bit with Snake, but her eventual fate in *Metal Gear Solid 4* sort of implies it was only ever a deepened friendship.



OTACON AND SNAKE'S FRIENDSHIP

SNAKE'S ODD RELATIONSHIP with Otacon is one of the unusual highlights of *Metal Gear Solid*: super soldier meets otaku, and what is at first a useful alliance soon turns into a lifelong friendship. Snake's interactions with his allies are all pretty entertaining in *Metal Gear Solid*, yet Otacon brings out a lighter side of Snake that really helps differentiate him from forgettable one-note videogame action heroes.



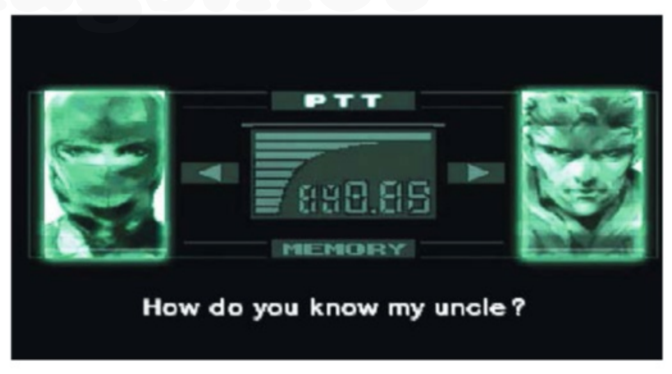
MULTIPLE ENDINGS, VIA TORTURE

A FORWARD-LOOKING IDEA, failing to resist Revolver Ocelot's torture at around the game's mid-point results in the actually quite nasty consequence of Meryl's death, which changes the ending to Snake escaping Shadow Moses with Otacon instead of Meryl. Multiple endings wouldn't be revisited in subsequent entries despite the success of the idea in *MGS* – so just what was Kojima thinking?



"YOU'VE GOT A GREAT BUTT"

■ A LUDICROUS AND cheeky bit of vague sexism from Snake that represents the scripting problems of *Metal Gear Solid*, which are about as numerous as its successes. This Eighties action movie bit of trash dialogue is about as bad as it gets, and given that Snake himself was generally pretty respectful to female characters in the sequels, this was a one-off.



BACK OF THE CD CASE

■ EVERYONE KNOWS THIS one and every outlet in history has referenced it to the point of *FFVII*/Aeris' death nightmare fatigue, so it's barely worth talking about. Instead we'll share an anecdote: one writer on this magazine fell foul of the CD case codec idea by playing a pirated version owned by their cousin, using a bad photocopy to work it out. Piracy never wins, kids.



METAL GEAR ITSELF

■ THE BEAUTY OF the *Metal Gear* franchise is that, while primarily about the idea of war, espionage and military action, the imagery of the franchise is anything but boring realism. Metal Gear REX is a walking nuclear robot – it's a mech by any other name, pretty much, and as was the case in *Metal Gear* and subsequent games in the series, this is a tenet of the franchise.



THE FINAL BATTLE IS A FISTFIGHT

■ DESPITE SOLID SNAKE being armed to the teeth with all the Stinger and Nikita missiles he'll ever need, the last encounter with Liquid Snake, on top of Metal Gear REX, is an elaborate pub fight – a winning creative choice. The designers know it's more intimate, a raw way to determine the outcome of the story, for players to really feel like Snake earns his superiority in the most cathartic way possible.



PSYCHO MANTIS

■ AGAIN, LIKE THE CD case idea, the fourth wall nature of this has been discussed to death, so let's focus on the portrayal of Mantis himself. The black skeletal vest, the scorched-looking skin, the gas mask and the strained delivery of his dialogue – this is as close to a horror villain that *MGS* has, a puppet master who manipulates Meryl's actions and makes the player feel more helpless than they would against a bipedal nuclear robot.



SNIPER WOLF

■ CATACLYSMIC MELODRAMA AS Otacon mourns the death of a boss who tore a bullet through Meryl's stomach and therefore made you backtrack to almost the start of the game. Otacon's blubbing and the howling of an actual wolf are the worst offenders for cutscene nonsense, though the gigantic field setting of the battle is fantastic, and returning to it in *Guns Of The Patriots* to fight Crying Wolf was a real treat.

THE MYSTERY OF

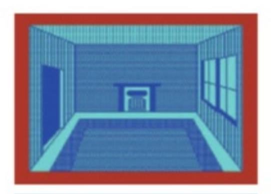
HOW DID AN OLD HOUSE OFFERING A 1920S GIRL'S BOARDING SCHOOL EXPERIENCE BECOME AN OUTLET FOR SOME OF THE MOST CREATIVELY ENTERPRISING TEXT ADVENTURES ON COMMODORE 64? DISCOVER ST. BRIDE'S, ONE OF GAMING'S ODDITIES…

Today you've a mystery to solve. Last night you arrived at St. Bride's. The mistresses and girls really believe they are in an old style boarding school. You even wonder if you're not a bit mad to think you're from the 1980s. You want to find out what's going on while you still can… Your adventure starts here…"

So begins *The Secret Of St. Bride's*, the inaugural text adventure from the programming hotbed at St. Bride's School: a very peculiar institution offering patrons a Twenties/Thirties-style boarding school immersion, operating out of a rackety old house in Burtonport, County Donegal. The set-up for the game echoed a carefully constructed and maintained aura of mystery around the place itself, advertised in the early Eighties broadsheets as a place where women could go to re-live a *St. Trinians*-style education they'd never actually experienced. "St. Bride's offers a standard classical curriculum," ran the prospectus, "the cardinal subjects being Mathematics, Elementary Latin, Grammar and Literature. The day begins with the rising bell at half past seven… Our girls receive the healthy benefit of lively sea air and fresh open countryside, and in the matter of sunshine, so vital to the health of growing children, we are singularly well favoured." The School also boasted facilities such as "a modern gramophone which may sometimes be used by an unsupervised group of girls providing that great care is taken to avoid overwinding".



■ A mail order advert for *The Secret Of St. Bride's*.







■ An elephant proved to be the nemesis of St. Bride's schoolgirls.







■ *Jack The Ripper* was a violent departure from *St Bride's* whimsy.

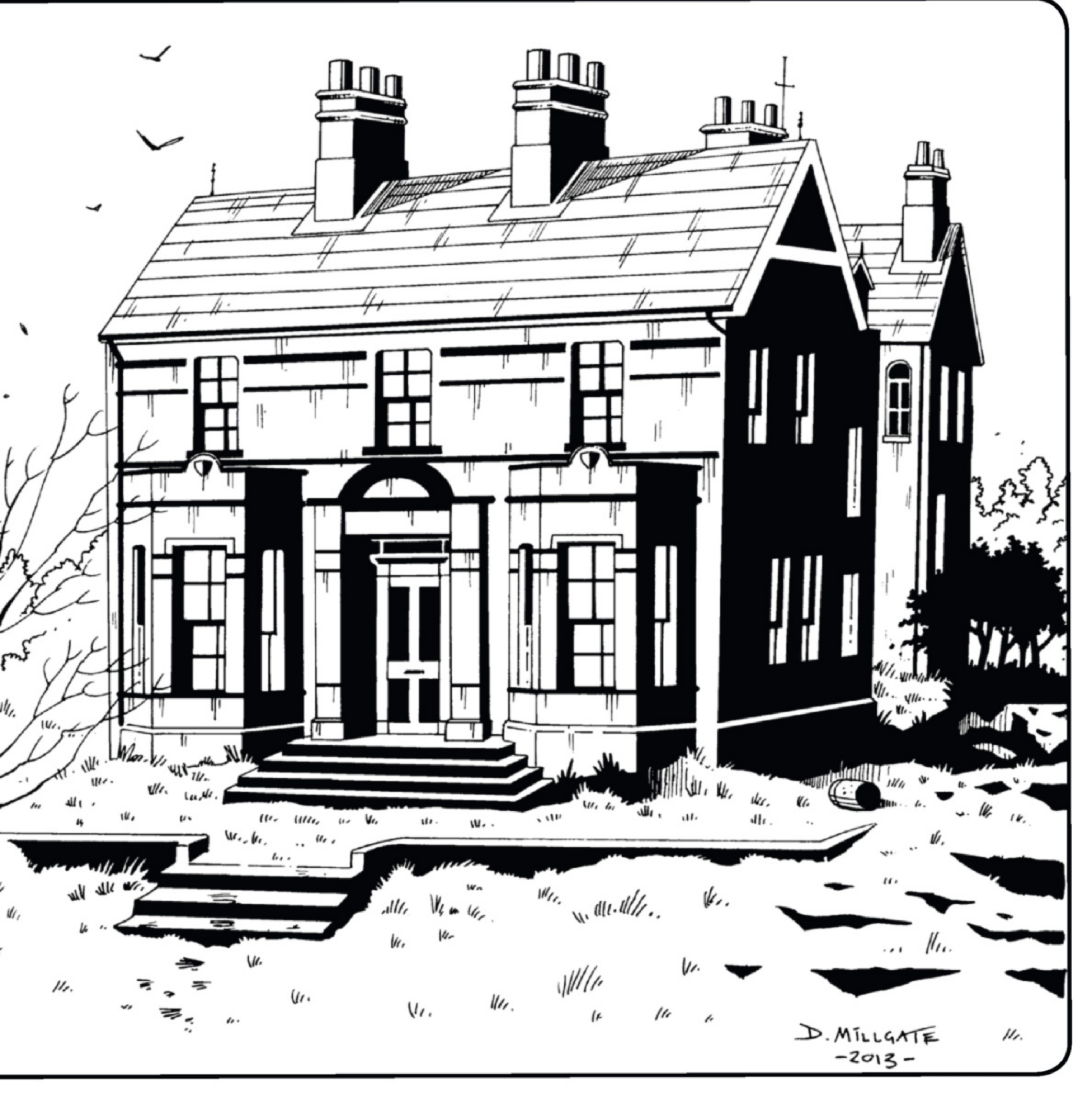
"We used, all the time, to see a lady around Burtonport wearing very old fashioned clothes and a little white bonnet," recalls Catherine McGlynn of Irish tourism website Holiday Donegal when **games™** enquires about the history of the estate. "She drove a very old style black car. I wonder if she was the maid of the house?" She was not. Two such women were in fact running the whole show at St. Bride's: using pseudonyms, never seen out of Victorian costume, and advocating a return to the values of that era. Among their many side-projects was a campaign to abolish the metric system – with the motto "Don't Give an Inch" – of which Sir Patrick Moore was a patron. Anachronistically, they published computer games, but this, says Clem Chambers, former head of their occasional publishers CRL (now a financial pundit and author), was some way from being the weirdest thing about it. "It was certainly a strange set-up," he chuckles, "but these were the days when you could go on holiday to Colditz and play at escaping and all that wish-fulfilment kind of stuff. That they operated a holiday school and published games was comparatively not odd…"

Trying to investigate St. Bride's is both an intriguing and frustrating experience. The people that know the answers remain determinedly secretive, while the people that are willing to talk tend to be fascinated but mystified. Each step along the timeline simply yields further questions. Even the journalists that visited the school during its 8-bit heyday were none the wiser when they left.

The facts, as far as they can be ascertained, start with the house itself, still standing and commonly known in Burtonport as the Atlantis House, after the Atlantis Foundation, who inhabited it before St. Bride's. Initially a hippy-ish commune of "free thinkers", they became infamous for their use of primal scream therapy: roaring out one's inner turmoil to attain a purer state of consciousness. They were quickly dubbed the "Screamers" by the Burtonport locals, and subsequently relocated offshore to the island of Inishfree to escape increasing press intrusion. Legend had it, with the right weather conditions, you could stand on the Burtonport harbour and hear their banshee wailing coming across the water.

This was during the Seventies, and sometime in the early Eighties, the vacant house was taken over by a small all-female community inspired by a student club founded at Oxford's Lady Margaret Hall. The club's founding members had gradually created a complex philosophy and fantasy world called 'Aristasia', which posited two contrasting female 'sexes' and encouraged retreat from the modern world. They referred to the swinging Sixties, deemed to be the beginning of civilisation's »

ST. BRIDE`S





■ *The Snow Queen* was set to be part of a sprawling series of interactive books based on popular fiction, however further instalments failed to materialise.





■ *The Snow Queen* is one of St. Bride's lesser known titles.

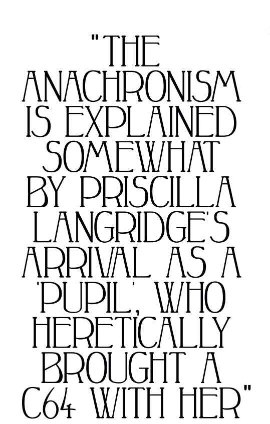
end, as 'The Eclipse', while the real world outside Aristasia was designated 'The Pit'.

With the Atlantis Commune departed, the Aristasian women rechristened the house St. Bride's (after the 5th-Century Irish abbess and miracle-worker). Candida Crewe, who visited for the *Telegraph* magazine, described it as like stepping into a Gothic novel where "a single candle flickered behind a lace curtain, guests were invited into a parlour heated only by a feeble coal fire, and the mistress of the house greeted her guests wearing a long black dress and white lace collar".

"They were called Priscilla and Scarlett, as I recall," says Chambers of the two matriarchs running St. Bride's. "They ran a school for adults, dressing up like the Famous Five, and it was a bloody great house in Ireland – although I never visited it – in the days when bloody great houses in Ireland cost threepence. As a piece of real estate, by the end of the Nineties or whatever, after the Celtic tiger roared, it was probably worth millions. But at that time you could probably buy a huge ancestral pile, school-sized building over there for practically nothing."

The property itself was rented. The most prominent of the two mistresses, Scarlett, is now best known by the name Marianne Martindale, and has also at various times gone by the monikers Miss Partridge, Miss Traill, Mari De Colwyn, Brighe Dachcolwyn and Clare Tyrell. "One's real name is the name one is using at the time," was the explanation given to *Sinclair User*'s Bill Scolding. Scolding and Crash's John Minson (both of whom recently spoke to **games™** on the subject, but not on the record), along with three cohorts from the Eighties computing press, took the opportunity for a visit to the school when they were called to Ireland for a junket publicising the gimmicky *Surf Champ* (the

"THE ANACHRONISM IS EXPLAINED SOMEWHAT BY PRISCILLA LANGRIDGE'S ARRIVAL AS A 'PUPIL', WHO HERETICALLY BROUGHT A C64 WITH HER"



■ *Second Life* is where the values or St. Brides and Marianne Martindale continue.

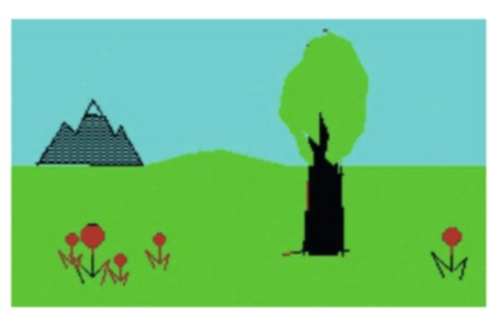


■ However, these days the virtual space is looking a little empty…

game that came with a plastic surfboard that fitted over the Spectrum's rubber keys). Minson wrote it up for *Crash* as a kind of Hunter S. Thompson road trip: "We were just outside Rossnowlagh on the Atlantic coast when the Guinness began to take hold…"

No amount of Guinness, it seemed, was enough to cushion the culture shock. After a tortuous journey that hadn't looked tricky on the map, he wondered if he hadn't fallen through a time warp, arriving at a place that didn't even have electric lights. Incumbent computer programmers seemed unlikely, but the anachronism is explained somewhat by Priscilla Langridge's arrival as a "pupil", who heretically brought a Commodore 64 with her.

"They had one plug in one room, I recall being the story," Chambers tells us. Langridge herself had responded to one of the newspaper advertisements offering idiosyncratic escape from normality for £120 a week and stayed on. Martindale was initially sceptical about the computer, but Langridge told Minson "she realised that unlike television, which she thinks is passive and mind-rotting, computer games call for concentration and commitment."



■ *The Secret Of St. Bride's* ensured that the institute attracted plenty of media coverage, largely due to the ironic nature of its development.







■ *Dogboy* is an obscure St. Bride's game, released in 1992 alongside *White Feather Cloak* and *Silverwolf*.

"I THINK THEY REALISED THE GAMES WERE A BRILLIANT IDEA TO PUBLICISE THEIR SCHOOL, AND OBVIOUSLY THEY WERE RIGHT"

CLEM CHAMBERS, FORMER HEAD OF CRL

"I didn't have any knowledge of computers," Martindale elaborated to Scolding. "My experience was in thinking backwards. But I found they were wonderful, they were magical. I'm a great fan of racing car games." A wheeze enjoyed by the St. Bride's girls on their afternoon rambles, in which they "noticed odd things, pretended they were clues, and worked out the connections between them" became the basis of *The Secret of St. Bride's*.

Langridge wrote it using the adventure programming software Quill, beginning on her C64 and later migrating to the Speccy. Already apparently a writer before she came to St. Bride's, she told Minson she had found the economical two-word inputs of the text adventure format creatively liberating. "People make a fetish of excess sophistication," she mused.

Ultimately, St. Bride's was responsible for eight completed games, but the release history is chequered, and a handful written in the Eighties seem not to have surfaced until the early Nineties when they were picked up by re-release houses GI Games and Zenobi. *The Secret Of St. Bride's* introduced both the school and heroine Trixie Trinian, and was a mail-order affair from the school itself: advertised with images of a stockinged and high-heeled *St. Trinian's*-type schoolgirl. Its most visible follow-ups, due to proper distribution by CRL, were *The Very Big Cave Adventure*, *Bugsy*, and the infamous *Jack The Ripper*. Less well known and sparsely reviewed were *The Snow Queen*, *Silverwolf*, *Dogboy* and *White Feather Cloak*: the latter three only finally surfacing together in 1992. All were written with Quill and its successor The Professional Adventure Writer. "The original game was *The Secret Of St. Bride's*, which was, I suppose, perhaps inspired by *Pimania*, that Mel Croucher did," muses Chambers. "I'm sure they thought, 'Ooh, adventure games, that's not technically very demanding, *Pimania* seems to have made a fair amount of money, we could use it to publicise our wonderful school idea…' Then – ta-da! – here it is!" *The Secret Of St. Bride's* was a success in its own right. The title sees the player (as Trixie Trinian) waking one morning in 1985 (in "a holiday centre in Ireland where you experience old-fashioned storybook schoolgirl life") to discover that all evidence points to the year actually being 1927.

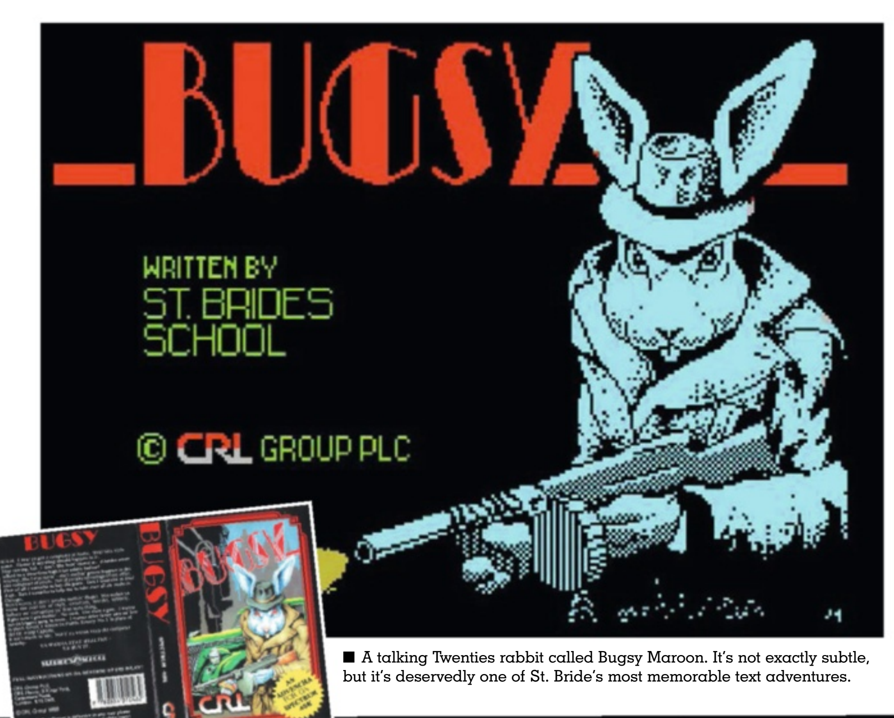
Initial escapades include donning a gown to get past the some stern mistresses; and of course, judiciously using a mouse to frighten off a charging elephant. Outside the school you encounter both village life (the local "peeler" will arrest you at the drop of a gymslip) and some fantasy creatures, before you head for town, marry a maharaja, and track down the »



■ St. Bride's attention to detail in regards to characters was unsurpassed for its time.



■ It's been suggested that there were various women playing the role of Miss Martindale…



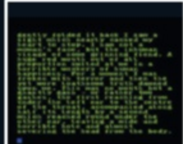
■ A talking Twenties rabbit called Bugsy Maroon. It's not exactly subtle, but it's deservedly one of St. Bride's most memorable text adventures.

VIDEO NASTIES

■ *Jack The Ripper* was, notoriously, the first computer game ever to be granted an 18 certificate by the BBFC. It seems incredible now that some gruesome text and 8-bit stills could have caused controversy, but *Jack The Ripper* was the *GTA* of its day. CRL's Clem Chambers insisted with a straight face that certification for "adult" games was a moral responsibility. Now, he admits cheerfully, "I was trolling!"

"I saw a copy of *The Sun* that had a story about the Video Nasties controversy," he laughs, "and I thought, 'Aha! Nobody's ever put a film certificate on a game! If I do it first I'll get loads of coverage!'" It worked, but also backfired. "It sold out on day one but then the middlemen refused to re-stock it," he laments. "Our distributor was upset about it being a success and didn't want it to sell. It was basically strangled in distribution."







■ *Jack The Ripper* earning an 18 rating is about as ludicrous as certificating library books.

mysterious authoress Ms. Merlin who has the power to send you back to your own time. There's also an epilogue with a magic amulet, should you choose to indulge.

It is, obviously, all a jolly silly lark, but it sows the seeds of most of the subsequent St. Bride's adventures: humour, fantasy, and independent female characters. Trixie reappeared in *The Very Big Cave Adventure* (obviously spoofing the original text epic *Colossal Caves*), this time as your guide and narrator. She was, like many programmers and developers at the time, fond of terrible puns – the bull that believes your outrageous lie is a "gully bull"; when you blow it up it's "a bomb in a bull" – and of commenting on the proceedings themselves. "The description of this room is very misleading," she apologises at one point. "I'd complain if I were you."

Also strikingly independent – to the extent that she sometimes takes control of the game away from the player – is Gerda, heroine of *The Snow Queen*: based, obviously, on the Hans Christian Anderson fairytale and intended as the first in a series of "interactive books" (games based on *Alice In Wonderland* and *Raffles* were also mooted but never materialised). And there was another modern-day schoolgirl – Petra Stone – at the centre of *Silverwolf*, in which the player can switch between four female characters. An accompanying comic was proposed and designed, but seems never to have been published, and may have contributed to *Silverwolf*'s much-belated appearance. Another game tying into a proposed St. Bride's comic, the superheroine adventure *Wondergirl*, never materialised at all.

What did appear on game shop shelves was *Bugsy*: the strange tale of a gangster rabbit rising through the Chicago mob via protection rackets and booze-running until he's big enough to take down Al Capone. Like Trixie, Bugsy is grudgingly respectful if you do well at the game, but basically has little patience with "keyboard bashers". "If you ain't figured dat dis street leads east/west by now, I ain't gonna tell ya," he growls.



■ Miss Martindale welcoming girls to St. Bride's. Not pictured: Commodore 64.

THE HORROR, THE HORROR

■ St Bride's *Jack The Ripper* formed part of a series of horror text adventures published by CRL. "It was their idea; they came to us with it," recalls CRL head honcho Clem Chambers. "They said, 'We're Victorians, we'd like to do it!' So we said, 'Yeah, course you can!'"

They were, however, entering territory that had previously been inhabited by a sole occupant. Rod Pike had written literary gothic horror games for CRL based on *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* and *The Wolfman* (he also composed *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* for short-lived publisher The Essential Myth). An industrial engineer by profession, he did his adventure programming in the evenings. "I don't like humorous games," he told *C&VG*'s Keith Campbell. "I prefer to be scared to death in the comfort of my living room. My aim is to scare the pants off the player."

His personal text adventure ethos was that every location should have a definite purpose. Some of his puzzles could be infuriatingly obscure however: a locked door in the opening portion of *Frankenstein*, for example, can only be opened by your father, who only arrives if you sit in an armchair and wait for him.



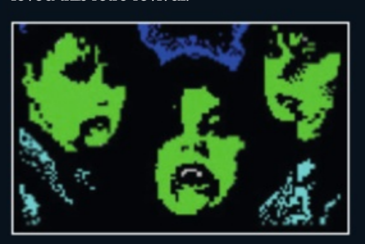
Campbell's seems to have been his only published interview, and he remains elusive. "People have looked for him and haven't found him," Chambers confirms.

So who was he? "Good question," says Chambers. "He was a nice guy who liked to write. I felt that he was a bit like a UK Stephen King: he was very softly spoken and pleasant, but you could imagine he might write horror."

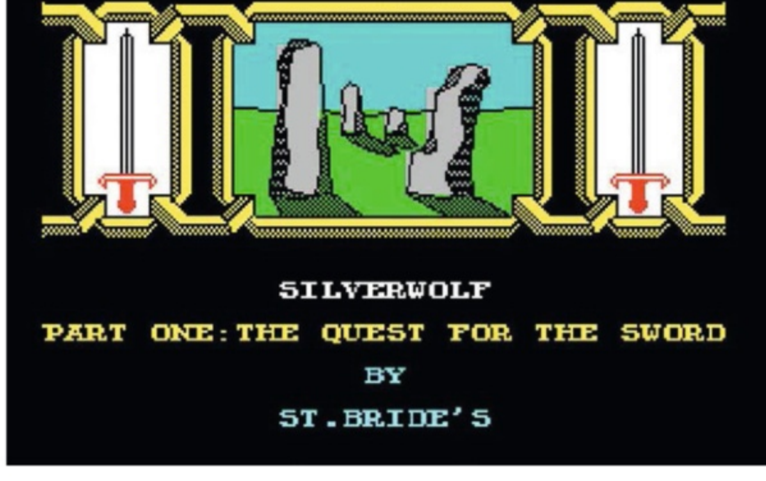
Wolfman was his final game, leaving the way clear for St Bride's' foray into Ripperdom. "I think he wanted to write novels," Chambers recalls. "I'm sure his books would have been really good but I don't think he was ever published. He was writing in a void, effectively, with us as his bridge to his audience, and he was very happy for any affirmation. He would've loved this retro revival."



■ Rod Pike's last game was the incredibly evocative *Wolfman*, a fitting swansong.



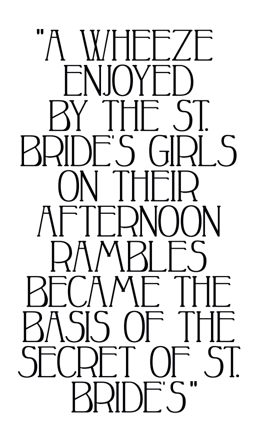
■ It might seem antiquated, but Rod Pike's horror titles were truly chilling.



■ St. Bride's noticeably progressed as a developer, with its later titles exhibiting more vibrant visuals.



■ *The Very Big Cave Adventure* proved to be one of the Spectrum's defining text adventure games.



And of course, there was *Jack The Ripper*: a gruesome literary horror game, the solution to which involved wielding the soul essence of one of Jack's female victims to end his reign of terror. Interestingly, solving the mystery of the Ripper's identity is irrelevant, and after the first two-thirds around the streets and houses of Victorian London, the final, utterly bizarre stretch has you wrestling with baffling Masonic puzzles in a subterranean underverse.

"They were great games," remembers Chambers. "They were anachronistic to their supposed ethos, but I think, basically, St. Bride's were in business: they were doing it on a commercial basis, however un-commercial they may have looked! In those days, once you got past a certain level of complexity, you didn't need incredibly specialised skills to write computer games. I think they realised the games were a brilliant idea to publicise their school, and obviously they were right: they got buckets of press." The games, as Chambers rightly suspects, turn out to have been part of a wider business portfolio that also included handmade costumes ("silk, satin and lace dresses, styles from 1800 to 1940, also maidservants' uniforms" ran a small ad) and a publishing house, The Wildfire Club, through which the school published female-focused periodicals (*Artemis*, *The Romantic* and others) and books by Martindale such as *The District Governess* and *The Female Disciplinary Manual*.

"A WHEEZE ENJOYED BY THE ST. BRIDE'S GIRLS ON THEIR AFTERNOON RAMBLES BECAME THE BASIS OF THE SECRET OF ST. BRIDE'S"

It's here that we come to the crux of what was going on behind the coding at St. Bride's. Were these videogames the by-product of an innocuous institution for role-playing eccentrics, or was there something more fetishistic and deliberate at its core? The answer appears to be both. On the one hand, it was a sort of "romantic retreat where 19th century values, politeness and dressmaking were preferred to the tawdry modern world", but in investigating St. Bride's and its subsequent iterations, the word 'discipline' comes up frequently. In the early Nineties, before the school eventually closed, Martindale was convicted of caning a pupil rather more enthusiastically than the recipient would have liked. "Whenever I have a maid, she receives corporal punishment," she told *The Independent*'s Rosie Millard in 1995. "I have always beaten my maids."

St. Bride's itself moved to Oxford in 1993 after an alleged disagreement with the landlord (Chambers once bumped into them in Oxford, "still fully garbed out in all their crinolines"), before eventually ending up in London. Yet it's more the principle of the house as a development outlet that makes St. Bride's so fascinating. Several high-profile developers have their own eccentricities, like Jeff Minter's llamas or Hideo Kojima's constant photos of food on Twitter, but a roleplaying business with such varied alternative philosophies becoming a full-fledged developer of notable text adventures remains a fascinatingly odd part of a considerably deeper story, much more so than tweeting pictures or living on a farm.

The concept of the school itself even extended into the digital space after Aristasia gradually became a sprawling online community (perpetuating the dichotomy of using technology to maintain a community supporting a pre-Sixties way of life) and eventually factionalised and broke apart. An Aristasian embassy still stands in *Second Life*. It once promised "groups of girls to be found chatting at all hours of night and day", but it's eerily quiet there now.

The Burtonport St. Bride's house too stands empty, vaguely known still as the home of The Screamers and the women that came after them. Tracing the fate of its former inhabitants may lead in unexpected directions, but its principal legacy, though modest, perhaps remains those eight simple games from the Eighties. Easily available at the click of an emulator, they allow a glimpse into a world where fantasies could be indulged: whether they be of schoolgirl adventures, fairytale quests or gothic sleuthing.

Three decades on, while the games industry still struggles to incorporate female protagonists in any meaningful way, it's worth remembering that St. Bride's was among the first, creating worlds where the likes of Trixie Trinian and Petra Stone could take decisive action. Despite all the peripheral weirdness, it's those characters that remain the greatest testament to the dwindled spirit of the fascinating establishment that was St. Bride's.

COLD COMFORTS

There are, of course, compensations even to an English Winter. Many different ones. Mink, open fires, ermine, mulled wine, fox, hot chestnuts, chinchilla, and even the humble rabbit.

Do not take my previous piece amiss, dear reader. I yield to no one in my love and admiration for Nature and her Art. It is merely that, like many artists, she works better in collaboration. One must avoid the terrible mistake of those ghastly modern musical groups who imagine that they can write, play and sing their own music. They are jacks of all trades and painfully evidently masters of none. Popular music is the work of four kinds of artist: composer, lyricist, musician and singer. A few people combine the talents of two of them in one person. Very few (other than the above-mentioned Mr. Noel Coward) of more.

So it is with Nature. She cannot by herself make winter perfect. She requires three other kinds of artist: the designer, the furrier and the lady. The designer looks at nature's wonderful creations in the raw and sees how they can be shaped into something truly exquisite. The furrier executes this design with consummate skill. Yet all three artists are nothing without the fourth: the lady, who will display the work with elegance, poise and feminine magnificence.

Nature, Art and Breeding. The three indispensable ingredients of Perfection.

There is, of course, one further traditional requirement for Art, and that is Patronage. In the case of the Art that interests us at present, we may say that it is precisely for this purpose that the institution of Holy Matrimony was created, though if a Lady prefers to remain unmarried, her Daddy will usually prove generous. Or failing all else, she might even apply to the paternal relation.

These vulgar financial underpinnings of great Art have been rendered rather less troublesome in recent years by an absolutely wonderful body of people known as the Animal Rights Movement. These generous and compassionate souls dedicate enormous amounts of time, often at considerable personal risk, to lowering the price of furs to a point where they can actually be worn by ladies, and not just by the wives of multinational spivs and corporate cockneys. Often these campaigners are rather scruffy and dismal individuals themselves, which makes their concern for the welfare of those of us who have the means and the looks to dress splendidly even more touching.

It is not my usual practice in this column to wax sentimental, far less to be public-spirited. But this season is sometimes regarded as a time for giving. So if you have a few shillings to spare and were casting about for a worthy cause, do spare a thought for those selfless Animal Rights people.

On the other hand, if you have rather more than a few shillings to spare, I did have my eye on a rather splendid chinchilla stole in a charming little shop in Jermyn Street.



■ Miss Martindale wrote a regular column for men's magazine *The Chap* after departing St. Bride's, remaining elusive even to the magazine's staff.



■ A review of *Jack The Ripper* from *Sinclair User* describes it as another "solid product of the St. Bride's hothouse.'



THE RETRO GUIDE TO…

TREASURE

Ever since exploding onto the console scene with Mega Drive hit Gunstar Heroes, Treasure has proven to be one of the industry's most interesting and imaginative software developers. Don't believe us? We'll just let the games speak for themselves…

YOU INSTANTLY KNOW when you're playing a Treasure game. While a relatively small company, Treasure has developed a reputation because of its insistence on imaginative mechanics, inventive bosses and its habit of pushing hardware to its breaking point. Treasure is currently celebrating its 21st anniversary and it's managed to reach that impressive milestone in a difficult industry by putting out quality product and cleverly opting between niche personal projects and licensed tie-ins, mainly for numerous Japanese manga. It's worth noting, however, that even Treasure's licensed games are packed with creativity, making it one of the most exciting Japanese developers around. Formed from ex-Konami employees, Treasure has recently been playing it safe by focusing on enhanced digital productions of some of its best games – *Radiant Silvergun*, *Guardian Heroes* and *Ikaruga* – but when you consider those titles are deemed to be at the pinnacle of their genres, it becomes easier to cut the developer some slack. Join us as we look back at every game in Treasure's catalogue. You may be surprised at just how many great gems there are.





GUNSTAR HEROES 1993

SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE, GAME GEAR **PUBLISHER:** SEGA

Treasure's calling card was a gigantic two-fingered salute to the industry that left gamers in no doubt that here was a developer to keep an eye on. Everything about *Gunstar Heroes* is superb and it remains one of the best run-and-guns on any system. The graphics are ridiculous with beautifully animated sprites, insane technical routines, imaginative bosses and intricately detailed backgrounds. It's the gameplay where *Gunstar Heroes* truly excels, however, delivering tight mechanics, outlandish level design and a slew of insanely designed bosses that still manage to impress today. It's funny as well, featuring plenty of quirky little traits and a silly sense of humour that would appear in many of Treasure's later games.

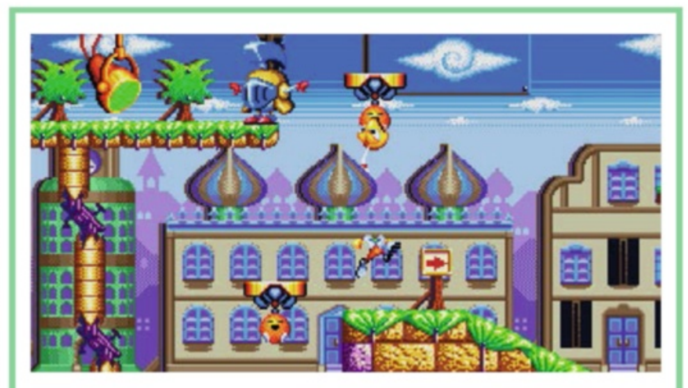
MCDONALD'S TREASURE LAND ADVENTURE 1993

SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE **PUBLISHER:** SEGA

Think a videogame starring the world's scariest burger-selling clown would be rubbish? Think again, because Treasure did the impossible and made a licensed McDonald's game that was genuinely fun to play. While it's not as technically proficient as Treasure's spectacular debut, it remains an exceedingly gorgeous game with plenty of slick animation and some truly impressive sprite work throughout the included four worlds. Ronald himself is surprisingly nimble for a clown, throwing around magic dust with abandon and using his magical umbrella to hook himself out of harm's way.







DYNAMITE HEADDY 1994

SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE, GAME GEAR, MASTER SYSTEM
PUBLISHER: SEGA

Treasure continued its publishing deal with Sega, delivering this delightfully nutty offering in 1994. Headdy is a character who can chuck his head in eight different directions, demolishing any enemy that comes into contact with it. It's an insanely ridiculous concept that takes the mask-swapping of *Kid Chameleon*, slaps in a dash of *DecapAttack* and finishes it off with some of Treasure's silliest bosses. Gigantic robotic sausage dogs, clockwork robots and oversized baby heads are just a few of the crazy mayors on offer, while Treasure caps the package off with some of its best visuals. Packed with humour and power-ups for *Headdy*'s different heads it's a classic and arguably one of Treasure's most accessible games.



YŪ YŪ HAKUSHO: MAKYŌ TŌITSUSEN 1994

SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE
PUBLISHER: SEGA

Treasure's fourth Mega Drive release was also its second game to be based on a licence. Based on the popular manga series, it's essentially a one-on-one fighter, although Treasure adds its own quirky angle to proceedings. *Yu Yu Hakusho: Makyo Toitsusen* was not only playable across both the Mega Drive's 3 and 6-button controllers, but also featured plenty of dynamic gameplay mechanics, ranging from the multi-plane stage structure of SNK's *Fatal Fury* games, to some solid combo-based moves and the fantastic ability to play against three other players. The end result is a truly remarkable beat-'em-up that features all of Treasure's trademark flourishes and predates the manic gameplay of *Super Smash Bros* by a good five years.



ALIEN SOLDIER 1995

SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE
PUBLISHER: SEGA

Alien Soldier's story is surprisingly complex considering it's used to do nothing more than set the stage for a gauntlet of over-the-top bosses. You'll breeze through *Alien Soldier*'s levels, but that's the point. Treasure wanted your chicken-man hybrid to be in tip-top condition so it could punish you with some of the most dangerous bosses to ever appear in a Mega Drive shooter. *Alien Soldier* features over 30 bosses to defeat and each one is a masterpiece – often harbouring devious attack patterns that take an age to decipher. Luckily, Epsilon Eagle is more than equipped to tackle these monstrosities, sporting an insane array of weaponry that ranges from plasma shots to three-way projectiles. Just be warned that an original copy now costs over £100.





LIGHT CRUSADER 1995

SYSTEM: TREASURE
PUBLISHER: SEGA

Play Light Crusader and you'd be forgiven if you thought Treasure had nothing to do with it. Visually it's bland, with none of the graphical excellence or quirky character design you'd associate with the developer. In fact it's a pretty questionable release all round with bland gameplay, questionable collision detection and uninteresting mechanics. It's one of Treasure's biggest missteps and its only saving grace is a strong soundtrack, although even that is below Treasure's usual standard. A disappointing release that proved Treasure wasn't immune to making mistakes.

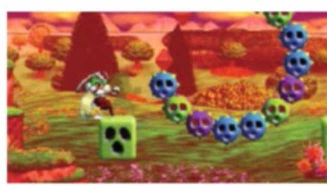


GUARDIAN HEROES 1996

SYSTEM: SATURN
PUBLISHER: SEGA

Treasure's collaboration with Sega continued with this astonishingly good Saturn debut. It's an epic take on the scrolling fighter with glorious cartoon visuals, a heavy emphasis on multiplayer and smart RPG mechanics. There's an engaging story, a giant sword-wielding skeleton and a selection of over-the-top bosses to fight. It runs with the combat mechanics found in *Yu Yu Hakusho*, adding a third plane to scrap on, as well as a new karma system and multiple levels. It's full of Treasure's typical flamboyant style and still plays brilliantly today.





MISCHIEF MAKERS 1997

SYSTEM: N64
PUBLISHER: ENIX, NINTENDO (EUROPE, US)

This peculiar little platformer-cum-action game often gets ignored because everyone was obsessed with 3D platforming on Nintendo's 64-bit console. Those gamers missed out, as *Mischief Makers* is a delightful oddity that boasts Treasure's typically nutty bosses, a hard to master control system and all kinds of silly gameplay mechanics that mainly revolve around grabbing enemies and flinging them around the screen. It's not quite as action-packed as Treasure's earlier games, but remains a highly satisfying blast that still plays exceptionally well.

"LIGHT CRUSADER IS ONE OF TREASURE'S BIGGEST MISSTEPS AND ITS ONLY SAVING GRACE IS A STRONG SOUNDTRACK"

SILHOUETTE MIRAGE 1997

SYSTEM: SATURN, PLAYSTATION
PUBLISHER: ESP, WORKING DESIGNS (US)

Many gamers in Europe missed out on this interesting run-and-gun as it wasn't released in Europe. While it lacks the polish of some of Treasure's earlier games, it has plenty of interesting play mechanics and saw Treasure fumbling around with the same duality mechanics that would prove to be such a draw in *Ikaruga*. Full of biblical references and insanely difficult, it's a solid action game that will please the hardcore Treasure crowd, but will leave many others nonplussed.







BEFORE TREASURE

Treasure's DNA can be found in plenty of old Konami games – here are some you may have played

Aliens 1990



ARCADE

Excellent run-and-gun that features solid visuals, plenty of creepy-looking alien bosses and some superb sections where you move into the screen shooting down anything that strays in your gun sights. It's only loosely based on the film, but don't hold that against it as it plays brilliantly.

RollerGames 1990



ARCADE, NES

Based on the TV show, this is another release where the arcade version is different to the NES conversion. The arcade outing is similar to the sport, featuring combatants moving around an ice rink, while the NES offering is a platformer with combat elements. Both are pretty average.

Punk Shot 1990



ARCADE

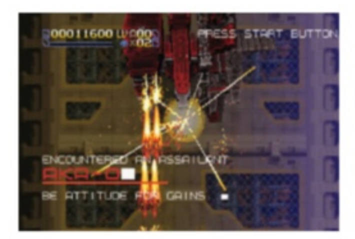
An interesting arcade release for up to four players that tried to combine *NBA Jam* shenanigans with urban street brawling to rather poor effect. While full of nice touches – food gets thrown onto the court and must be avoided – it's a pretty uninspired sports game with clunky controls.

The Simpsons Arcade Game 1991



ARCADE

Treasure staff were involved in quite a few Konami fighters, so it's no surprise that they went on to make the likes of *Guardian Heroes*. While the gameplay for *Simpsons* is fairly basic, it's a fun scrapper that perfectly captures the zany nature of the cartoon.





RADIANT SILVERGUN 1998

SYSTEM: SATURN, ARCADE
PUBLISHER: SEGA (ARCADE) ESP (SATURN)

There's a reason why *Radiant Silvergun* still fetches silly prices on eBay – it's quite simply one of the finest shoot-'em-ups ever crafted. Unlike other shooters, *Silvergun* immediately gives you access to all your power-ups – an insane selection of weaponry that includes lock-on lasers and a gigantic plasma sword. It also throws a silly number of bosses at you, every graphical effect the Saturn has in its repertoire and an amazingly moody soundtrack that perfectly matches the on-screen action. Both the arcade game along with its innovative 3-button weapon setup and a brand new Saturn mode are included.



RAKUGAKI SHOWTIME 1999

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION
PUBLISHER: ENIX

Treasure's first exclusive PlayStation game shares elements with Capcom's *Power Stone*, being a nutty party-based brawler for four players. In addition to a motley crew of odd-looking combatants, *Rakugaki*'s biggest draw (pun intended) is its visuals, which look like cut-out paper sketches come to life. They're all created in Han's (Treasure's resident artist) typical style and are beautifully animated to boot. Sadly, while the game is fun with friends, it lacks the complexity of Treasure's other fighters, making its high price tag hard to justify if playing on your own.

BAKURETSU MUTEKI BANGAIOH 1999

SYSTEM: N64, DREAMCAST
PUBLISHER: VARIOUS

Commonly known in the West as *Bangai-O*, this is another strange offering that proves to have insane hidden depths once you get to grips with its mechanics. Controlling a mech, you use its two pilots to switch between two very different weapons – homing missiles and a wall-bouncing laser – which can be used to wreak havoc. It's heavily reliant on combo-based play, and is filled with Treasure's odd sense of humour and distinctive art design. The Dreamcast version (shown here) is notably different in how it handles and also adds new bosses and an explosion counter.



SIN AND PUNISHMENT 2000

SYSTEM: N64
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO

Astonishing is perhaps the best word to sum up *Sin & Punishment*, Treasure's epic run-and-gun that pushed the N64 to near breaking point. While the control system takes a little while to get used to, it soon reveals itself to be incredibly flexible, allowing you to handle every enemy the game viciously chucks at you. Effectively a 3D version of *Cabal* with the typical gauntlet of Treasure bosses, it boasts state-of-the-art visuals, an amazingly moody score and superb character design. Originally only released in Japan, it received a fresh lease of life on Virtual Console.





SILPHEED: THE LOST PLANET 2000

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2
PUBLISHER: SWING! ENTERTAINMENT, GAME ARTS (JAPAN) WORKING DESIGNS (US)

This average sequel to Game Arts' popular Mega-CD game doesn't do the original justice. Treasure was obviously struggling with the PS2, as it's a technically weak game with little of the stylish panache the company is known for. The weapon system is rather neat – you equip weapons to either side of your ship – and the proximity combo provides an interesting touch, but it's surprisingly forgettable for a Treasure shooter.





Super Castlevania IV 1991



SNES

Effectively a reboot of the original NES game, Konami's fourth *Castlevania* release features huge bosses, interesting gameplay mechanics and some spectacular use of Mode 7. The soundtrack is to die for as well and remains one of the best on the console.

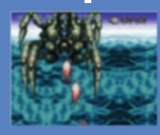
Contra III: The Alien Wars 1992



SNES

In many ways this feels like a blueprint for *Gunstar Heroes*. It features in-your-face weaponry that can be switched between or fired together, astonishing boss design and a selection of top-down levels. It remains one of the best 2D run-and-guns of all time.

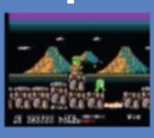
Axelay 1992



SNES

An obvious Treasure game in hindsight. In addition to being one of the best shooters on the SNES, it boasts outlandish boss design, spectacular visuals and a solid selection of weapons. It alternates between mind-blowing into-the-screen stages and side-on sections that still look great today.

Bucky O'Hare 1992



ARCADE, NES

Treasure staff had a role in both *Bucky O'Hare* games, and many cite it as the title that marked the turning point for disgruntled staff. While the arcade game was a scrolling beat-'em-up for four players, the NES offering was a more action-based platformer.

STRETCH PANIC 2001

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2
PUBLISHER: VARIOUS

This was Treasure's first game with full 3D movement and it's something of a missed opportunity. While it features some eccentric gameplay mechanics revolving around the lead character's stretchy scarf (an evolution of *Mischief Maker*'s grab attacks), it's let down by a wayward camera and clunky controls. It's not Treasure's worst game, but it's clear that the team's creativity was clashing against trying to get the best out of the PS2's hardware. An interesting oddity.





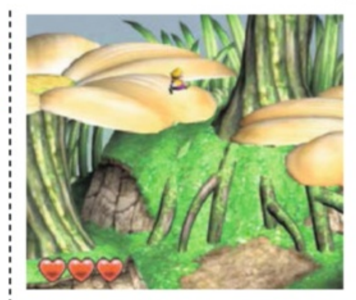
IKARUGA 2001

SYSTEM: ARCADE, GAMECUBE, DREAMCAST
PUBLISHER: VARIOUS

Treasure's spiritual successor to *Radiant Silvergun* remains a masterpiece in shoot-'em-up design. The duality/polarity mechanics first dallied with in *Silhouette Mirage* have been honed to perfection, giving *Ikaruga* almost puzzle-like gameplay as you work out how best to maximise your score with each wave of attacking enemies. It became one of the first 'last ever' Dreamcast releases and has been subsequently ported to numerous systems. Stunning to look at (mainly due to the black and white nature of the visuals) and boasting an incredibly atmospheric soundtrack it ranks – along with *Radiant Silvergun* – as one of the five best vertical shoot-'em-ups of all time.









WARIO WORLD 2003

SYSTEM: GAMECUBE
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO

Treasure's take on Mario's evil nemesis sees him up to his eyebrows in a slick platformer-cum-fighter that plays at a surprisingly nippy pace. There's a large emphasis on exploring to find all of Wario's loot, while the cartoony visuals complement Wario's over-the-top moves. The camera can be a little problematic at times and it lacks the polish of Mario's own outings, but *Wario World* remains an entertaining adventure that's filled with Treasure's typically imaginative level and character design. It also sees Treasure correcting many of the technical mistakes it made with *Stretch Panic*, something that would bode well for many future 3D releases from the developer.

AND THE REST

Every other game that Treasure has released

Tiny Toon Adventures: Buster's Bad Dream 2002

SYSTEM: GAME BOY ADVANCE
PUBLISHER: SWING!

A decent enough side-scrolling beat-'em-up based on the Warner Bros cartoon. It used elements that would later crop up in *Astro Boy*.



Hajime No Ippo: The Fighting! 2003

SYSTEM: GAME BOY ADVANCE **PUBLISHER:** ESP

A fast-paced, more complex variation on Nintendo's *Punch-Out!!* based on the popular Manga series. A solid scrapper.

Dragon Drive: D-Masters Shot 2003

SYSTEM: GAMECUBE **PUBLISHER:** BANDAI

A truly awful mash-up between *Zone Of The Enders* and *Panzer Dragoon*. It's so bad it's not even listed on Treasure's official website.

Gunstar Heroes Treasure Box 2006

SYSTEM: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** SEGA

Excellent Sega Ages compilation featuring stunning ports of *Gunstar Heroes*, *Dynamite Headdy* and *Alien Soldier*.

Bleach: Dark Souls 2007

SYSTEM: DS
PUBLISHER: SEGA

A solid update to the original DS fighter with new characters, additional gameplay modes and new move sets for existing characters.



Bangai-O Spirits 2008

SYSTEM: DS
PUBLISHER: VARIOUS

Excellent sequel featuring 160 levels, a new dash mechanic and several nifty new weapons. The DS's second screen acts as a useful map.

Bleach: Verses Crusade 2008

SYSTEM: WII **PUBLISHER:** SEGA

Another interesting fighter from Treasure, which was sadly confined to Japan. It's only available on Wii.

Bangai-O HD: Missile Fury 2011

SYSTEM: XBOX 360 **PUBLISHER:** D3

An enhanced update that features twin-stick controls, co-operative and competitive multiplayer and a nifty level editor.



Radiant Silvergun HD 2011

SYSTEM: XBOX 360
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT

Painstakingly created HD remake that includes a secret *Ikaruga* mode and online multiplayer, along with the ability to share replays.

Guardian Heroes HD 2011

SYSTEM: XBOX 360 **PUBLISHER:** SEGA

Another slick HD update with original and enhanced visuals, new gameplay mechanics, a rewritten story, online play and a survival mode added.



ASTRO BOY: OMEGA FACTOR 2004

SYSTEM: GAME BOY ADVANCE
PUBLISHER: VARIOUS

After hitting rock bottom with the awful *Dragon Drive*, Treasure bounced back with this epic GBA blaster based on the beloved Japanese manga. Co-created with Sega's Hitmaker, it's an interesting combination of scrapping and shooting that features a novel level-up system (you gain power by meeting new people) and plenty of insanely tough bosses. Interestingly, the Japanese offering is a little easier than its Western counterparts, but it's still as tough as proverbial old boots.



GRADIUS V 2004

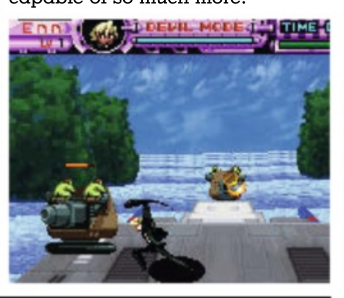
SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2
PUBLISHER: KONAMI

Ranks alongside *R-Type* as the finest horizontal shooter ever made. Treasure takes the original *Gradius* template and marries it to state-of-the-art visuals, intricately designed bosses, finely honed level design and the ability to control your drone-like multiples. It's one of the most beautiful shooters we've ever played and still looks good today. Essentially a run through some of the franchise's best levels, it offers an excellent two-player mode and a tiny hit box that allows Treasure to turn up the difficulty. Quite why it's never made a sequel remains a mystery, but we'd imagine low sales to be a probable cause.

ADVANCE GUARDIAN HEROES 2004

SYSTEM: GAME BOY ADVANCE
PUBLISHER: TREASURE, UBISOFT

Treasure once claimed it would never do sequels, preferring to instead focus on original content. It broke that promise with this average successor to its excellent Saturn release. While switching between planes is easier, the combat and magic available isn't as satisfying and it has a few technical issues as well. *Advance Guardian Heroes* remains a solid scrolling fighter, but Treasure is capable of so much more.







GUNSTAR SUPER HEROES 2005

SYSTEM: GAME BOY ADVANCE
PUBLISHER: SEGA

Treasure jumps back on the good ship Sega, with this excellent run-and-gun title. In addition to being a more than worthy successor to Treasure's debut game, the developer also sees fit to fill it with references to plenty of past Sega games, from *Flicky* to *After Burner*. Despite being on the same system, it's a far more technically impressive offering than *Advance Guardian Heroes*, allowing Treasure to squeeze every last drop of power out of Nintendo's console.



BLEACH: THE BLADE OF FATE 2006

SYSTEM: DS
PUBLISHER: SEGA

A fun, if wildly unbalanced brawler that's based on the popular anime series. The issues mainly come from the inclusion of card power-ups and an autoblock feature that can make the game exceptionally unbalanced. It's a pity that it's so dominant, as the actual scrapping is great fun, with Treasure experimenting with the four-player action first found in *Yu Yu Hakusho* 12 years earlier and adding a whole host of new gameplay modes, from time attacks to challenges.

SIN & PUNISHMENT: SUCCESSOR OF THE SKIES 2009

SYSTEM: WII
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO

Treasure's last physical release in the West was this fantastic sequel to the original Nintendo 64 cult hit. It's extremely similar to the original game in terms of its mechanics, but we'd argue that the four available control settings are far more agreeable – the original sometimes felt like patting your head and rubbing your tummy at the same time. Aesthetically it's up to Treasure's usual high standards, with distinctive art design, electrifying audio and suitably oversized bosses that range from giant killer seagulls that spit out crabs, to organic monstrosities that look like the twisted result of Giger designs and Jabba The Hutt. Filled with dazzling set pieces (the underwater level is breathtaking) and stuffed with outlandish bosses, its biggest failure is that it was unable to achieve decent sales, meaning a sequel is unlikely. Still, we're amazed it happened in the first place.







GAIST CRUSHER 2013

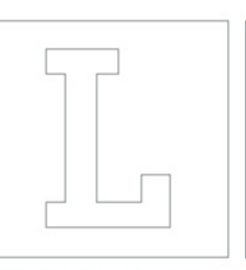
SYSTEM: 3DS
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM

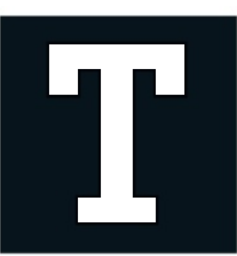
Treasure's first physical release in four years should hit Japan as you read this very feature. It's a brand new IP from Capcom that features customisable armour, gigantic monsters to scrap and an array of different characters and is clearly inspired by *Monster Hunter*. Aimed at a younger audience, it will also be available as a manga and anime. It's highly unlikely that this Japanese-centric release will come out over here, but we would love to be proven wrong.







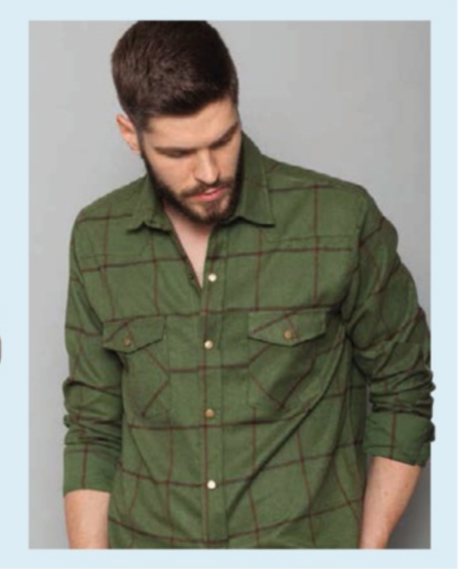




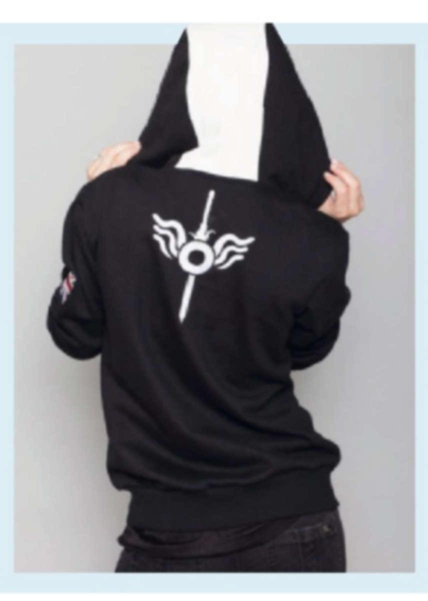
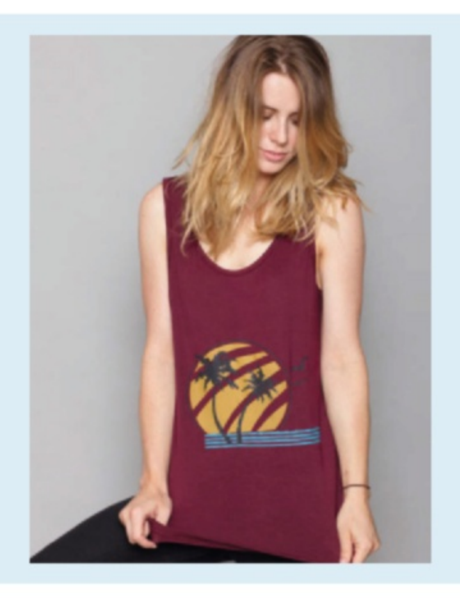
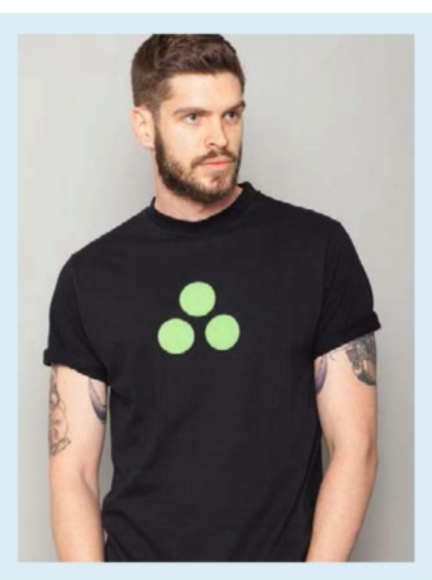
INSERT COIN CLOTHING

STUDIO: **Insert Coin Clothing** PRICE: **£22-55**

A LOT OF gaming-oriented clothing is a little, well, obvious – a T-shirt with a logo emblazoned lazily on the front makes you feel like a walking advertisement for whoever's mascot you're wearing. Insert Coin Clothing's thing is offering subtle, authentic alternatives for the fashion-conscious gaming advocate, using familiar iconography to create a variety of clothing worn by gamers who can't do irony without spending at least £20 first.

The clothing itself is well-made – the less consistent part comes in the quality of designs. Some look very sharp, like the *Hotline Miami* letterman jacket and Vic Viper barcode tee, but then others like the *Splinter Cell* shirt pictured below take the minimalist angle a little too far; three glow-in-the-dark dots to represent *Splinter Cell* is something we could knock off in InDesign in three minutes. The formula for creating some, like Ellie's Survival School or the Golden Saucer Amusement Park appears pretty simple, too: pick a location in a game then base the design around that. They're not massively perceptive as far as references go – but then again, they are appealing to a broader market than just hardcore gamers, plus pointing that out at all sounds a bit Comic Book Guy on our part. Still, what's interesting about the designs is their ability to cross over into a mainstream audience, and look decent in their own right whether the person gets the reference or not. For example, we saw a bloke wearing the *Hotline Miami* jacket in Bournemouth, recently – whether he played the game or not, he was still wearing it on his way to sink 12 pints.

GAMING CLOTHING



MINECRAFT CREEPER HOODIE

If you've ever had the urge to stalk innocent folk exploring verdant fields, this *Minecraft* hoodie will let you carry out your creeping in style.
http://tinyurl.com/q7ts5ur



SUPER MARIO BROTHERS LOUNGE PANTS

If you like lying around all day and making plumbers eat mushrooms and crawl through pipes, these airy trousers are for you.
http://tinyurl.com/nu2r7hq



FALLOUT JET SHIRT

The most addictive drug in the *Fallout* universe gets its own shirt, so you can have your favourite fix on top of your skin, as well as under it.
http://tinyurl.com/qbz6ork

TURTLE BEACH CALL OF DUTY: GHOSTS EAR FORCE SPECTRE

RETAILER: **AMAZON** PRICE: **£19.99**

**PLAYING *CALL OF* ***Duty* to its native soundtrack is a bit repetitive, right? With all those explosions and bullet whooshes, it just sounds like you're stuck in the audio mix of a Michael Bay film. The Ear Force Spectre enables you to plug your headset into your music player, and mix the game sounds with your own soundtrack independently – vital if you need a little death metal to help you concentrate as you rain bullets on your opponents.



QPAD MK-80 MECHANICAL KEYBOARD

MANUFACTURER: **QPAD** PRICE: **€129**

IF YOU'VE SPENT a chunk of money on your ideal PC setup, you want every part of your desktop to be perfect. The QPAD MK-80 is designed with gamer-friendly ergonomics in mind; rubber-coated keycaps provide soft padding for your fingers, height adjustment allows for your ideal angle of play and the back lighting system is tastefully pulled off – it's illuminating without being distracting. The MK-80 is a solid bit of kit, too; it won't fall apart in a hurry.



STEELSERIES SIBERIA ELITE

MANUFACTURER: **STEELSERIES** PRICE: **£200**

OUR MAIN ISSUE with most gaming headsets is the inevitable discomfort that sets in after a few hours of solid playing. The SteelSeries Siberia Elite headset addresses this complaint with memory foam ear cushions and an overhead suspension bridge – "It's like wearing a cloud" we sighed breathily when we tried them on. Replete with a 16.8-million-colour customisable LED array, extendable microphone and dedicated external sound card, the Siberia Elite is an ideal choice for gaming and multimedia use.



Talking to veteran industry figures because MMO Worlds has gone missing



NIGEL ALDERTON

Chuckie Egg creator

At the age of 17, Nigel Alderton created one of the ZX Spectrum's most egg-cellent platformers. Celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, **games™** speaks to the man behind Chuckie Egg

At what age did you realise you wanted to start working in videogames?
I was around 13 when one lunchtime at school I saw some kids going into this room. It was almost dark save for the glow of the green screens and all very secretive. So I managed to sneak in and watch the kids use the computers; eventually somebody let me on one and it was fantastic, like a whole new world. I was just absorbed by it for some reason.

So is this the point where the seeds for *Chuckie Egg* were sown?
Everybody was programming and there wasn't any software to speak of, so the only thing you could do was write your own. So, yes, it was kind of where it started. But they were expensive TRS-80s and the only computer I could dream of owning was a ZX81. Then I remember getting a leaflet about the Spectrum in advance of it coming out and we all sat at school drooling over this thing and its wonderful colours! I waited four months for it to turn up.

Where did the idea come from?
The two arcade games where all my ten pences were going were *Space Panic* and *Donkey Kong*. So I wrote a hybrid of those two games [and it] added to my dislike of games where there's a set path for each levels. I like a game where it is all about dexterity and you can find your own way through.

When you worked at A&F, did anyone encourage you to explore coding at all?
Not really. I was a kid making cups of tea and that was it. I pestered them and said 'Would you look at my game?' and they would fob me off. Then eventually one Saturday I finally got their attention. I remember them being really impressed, which was what I wanted; I needed somebody to say 'You're on the right track here'.

Somewhat unusually for the time, *Chuckie Egg* had four players. Why was that?
Because I like the atmosphere in an arcade where one person is playing and you get two or three people watching. It's what I was doing and it was lots of fun. I knew lots of people would buy the game and would have their mates round to play it and if you got three friends it was cool if you could all play it on one computer.

Do you have any regrets leaving the industry?
I was in contact with people from the games industry… it seemed to get a lot more commercial after I left. I don't think I have any particular talent as a businessman and working as a programmer when you're just a cog in a machine wouldn't have been for me either. The fun part of it was the early days when people like me and my next-door neighbour could write a little game about a rabbit travelling around the world, put an advert in a magazine and sell it for £4.50 a tape…so, no, I don't regret leaving.





Nigel would go on to work for Ocean Software and Elite Systems over the years before leaving the industry.



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